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**RAISING THE VOLUME OF THE TUTOR  
VOICE IN STUDENT ENGAGEMENT:  
A THEMATIC ANALYSIS**

**Karen Greig**

**PhD 2018**

**RAISING THE VOLUME OF THE TUTOR  
VOICE IN STUDENT ENGAGEMENT:  
A THEMATIC ANALYSIS**

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**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
of the  
Manchester Metropolitan University for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy**

**Department of People and Performance  
2018**

# Abstract


This thesis addresses the under-representation of the academic tutors' voice in the student engagement (SE) literature. A thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with tutors at a large post-1992 university in the North-West of England (NWU) revealed novel and important insights into tutor perceptions of SE and their influences. The findings reveal that a lack of clarity around the meaning of engagement is evident in both the literature and in the minds of tutors. Tutors did not identify student emotions or their past and present personal circumstances as SE influences. Indeed, the lens through which tutors viewed SE obscured influences that were not behavioural. Although tutors recognised that their teaching approaches influenced students' engagement, they identified university policies and procedures as potentially undermining the practices that enhance SE.

This thesis makes a number of significant theoretical and practical contributions. An enhanced version of Kahu's (2013) framework has been developed, which incorporates tutor perceptions of SE and their influences. The addition of the tutor voice to the SE literature develops and considerably enhances existing thinking and theoretical frameworks. The findings have policy and practice implications for the organisation under study as well as wider impacts on current thinking about the importance of the concept of SE in higher education. Therefore, this thesis represents a significant addition to the corpus of knowledge in this field.

# Declaration

No portion of the work referred to in this thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification at this or any other university or institute of learning.

Signed

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Karen Greig', written in a cursive style.

**Karen Greig**

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Among the many family members, friends and colleagues that have supported me throughout this long journey, far too many to name here, there are those without whose support the journey would not have been possible.

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## List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full Meaning
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
HE	Higher Education
HEA	The Higher Education Academy
NWU	North West University (the organisation under study)
PSRB	Professional Statutory and Regulatory Bodies
RO	Research Objective
SE	Student Engagement

# **1 Introduction**

## **1.1 Thesis background and purpose**

It is widely recognised that students are more likely to be successful if they engage with their studies (Krauss and Coates, 2008; Kuh, 2009a), but there is no consensus in the literature on the meaning of Student Engagement (SE) (Parsons and Taylor, 2011; Gibbs, 2014; Vuori, 2014; Groccia, 2018), and its drivers and barriers are unclear (Kahu and Nelson, 2018). This is important because SE is a key contributor to student success (Thomas 2012). The Teacher-Student Relationship is the crux of the learning situation (Smith, 2007), and is fundamental in the development of the student (Broughan and Grantham, 2012). Hence, tutor perceptions of SE are important because tutors are a significant SE stakeholder and yet their views are overlooked in the literature. Whilst this has been the case for many years, little has changed in recent times, and tutors continue to be neglected. For example, the RAISE17 International Conference on Student Engagement saw over 50 papers presented, but none of these considered the perspective of the tutor (RAISE 2017).

In research for a 2012 MRes dissertation, I found that the completion of a higher education (HE) course of study that focussed on sustainability-related issues was a key reason why many business owners had created sustainable businesses. As a teacher at that time, I was troubled with how difficult it was to engage students in the topic of sustainability. I wondered what more I could do in terms of my teaching practice to convey to my students the potential impact of sustainability related matters on their lives and careers. My enthusiasm for the subject, and what I believed to be appropriate and engaging teaching strategies and resources were clearly not achieving the impact I had anticipated. Although student feedback suggested an acceptable level of satisfaction with my teaching, attendance was often poor and preparatory work was regularly incomplete. Conversations with colleagues teaching a range of subjects suggested my experience was not unique. An initial review of the SE literature indicated that although institutional and student contributions in the literature were ubiquitous, tutor contributions were absent. Furthermore, the research base was more theoretical than empirical, originating chiefly in North America and Australasia.

As a tutor and a student, I am expected to engage with my teaching, engage my students and engage with my studies. Consequently, an understanding of the meaning of engagement and its drivers and barriers are important to me. The aim of this study is therefore to provide a broader, empirically-informed conceptualisation of student engagement (SE) in HE that incorporates the tutor perspective.

## **1.2 The research context**

### **1.2.1 Overview**

This research seeks to understand SE from perspectives of tutors employed by a large post-1992 university located in the North-West of England. The following section overviews the most significant legal and regulatory changes that have altered the landscape of UK HE. This is not intended to be fully comprehensive, but does provide an overview of changes in the sector that have affected HE practices. This leads into an introduction to the university under study that provides the context for the remainder of this thesis.

### **1.2.2 UK Higher Education**

Government policies influenced by neoliberal ideas and ideals have changed the landscape of higher education (HE) and thus the characteristics of the environment within which higher education institutions (HEIs) around the globe now operate (Jankowski and Provesis, 2014). Neoliberalism is defined by Harvey (2005) as ‘a theory of political economic practices’ in which the role of the state is to protect private property rights, to guarantee the quality and integrity of money, to create and ensure the proper functioning of free markets and free trade (Harvey, 2005). Since the 1970s the UK has experienced deregulation, privatisation, and state withdrawal from many areas of social provision (Harvey, 2005), including more recently higher education. The policies of successive UK governments have provided the conditions necessary for the creation of a market in HE, and established the institutions and laws necessary for its operation (Olssen, 1996). The neoliberal propositions of marketisation, consumerisation and managerialisation (Harris, 2014) are echoed in the nature and intentions underpinning many of these policies.

The Robbins Report (Robbins, 1963) asserted, “Courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so”. The Robbins Principle was galvanised almost three decades later by the

awarding in 1992 of university status to former polytechnics, which signalled the beginning of the transformation of UK HE from an elite system. According to Trow (1973) less than 15% of the eligible population participate in an elite system and 15-40% of the eligible population participate in a mass system. Similar intentions were echoed in the recommendations of the 1997 report of The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education commissioned in 1996 and chaired by Sir Ron Dearing, and the 2010 report of 'The Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance' entitled 'Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education' (Browne, 2010). The Browne Report (2010) proposed the removal of the cap on university tuition fees, which once removed, led to the creation of the market in higher education that exists today. The introduction in 2012 of a revised HE funding model reduced the proportion of teaching funded through direct grants from The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and increased the proportion of teaching funded from student contributions supported by UK Government-subsidised loans (2011). The new funding arrangements foreshadowed the repositioning of the student as a customer of the institution and introduced the concept of 'value for money' into HE.

Broadly in parallel with these developments, the Leitch Review of Skills (2006) sought to identify the skills the UK would need to maximise economic prosperity and productivity, and to improve social justice. Amongst its many recommendations was that by 2020, in excess of 40% of adults should be educated to degree level (or its vocational equivalent), with the action and investment this involved shared by government, employers and individuals. The level of employer and individual contribution was to be proportional to the private return derived. Focused on market-failures, the Government's investment was to ensure "a basic platform of skills for all" (Leitch, 2006:3) with help targeted where it was most needed.

Universities perform the synergistic functions of teaching and research and since the late 1980s have been under increasing pressure from external research funding bodies to evidence their research performance. In 1986, the UK University Grants Committee introduced The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), a national system for the evaluation of the quality of university research output. The RAE was carried out at roughly 5-year intervals on behalf of the UK HE funding councils that oversaw the selective allocation of research funding based on the evaluation against specific performance indicators of research quality. In 2014, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) replaced the RAE. The REF is an expert

review process also carried out on behalf of UK HE funding bodies. The quality of research submitted to the REF is evaluated against 34 discipline specific metrics. The evaluation is primarily in terms of originality, significance and rigour with reference to international research quality standards, demonstrable economic and social impact, and finally the quality and sustainability of the particular research environment (Hubble, 2015).

The external research funding income stream is as important in the current climate as it was in the early 1990s. An institution's performance determines its share of an estimated £2bn annual research fund and its ranking in various league tables (Ratcliffe, 2014). In an effort to convey the importance of the research Chris Husbands of UCLs Institute of Education noted that "For government, it is how new knowledge is generated, new science supported, innovations which will eventually strengthen national competitiveness developed. For universities, research is the lifeblood, motivating academics and defining their purpose." (Husbands, 2014). According to Ratcliffe (2014) HEIs spent an estimated £47m refining their REF2008 submissions and some allegedly engaged in the poaching of academic staff from rival universities. Drawing on Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) data, Husbands (2014) notes that research funding in the UK is extremely concentrated with most universities receiving very little from research assessment and 90% of funding since 2009 going to just 48 universities. An institutional focus on the production of the necessary volume and quality of income generating research has potential implications for the student and tutor experience and these are discussed in this study. In 1995, Parker and Jary predicted academics would have to focus on research that would gain a high rating rather than pursuing independence in research and creativity of thought. Miller (1995) similarly argued that academics would "become constrained, monitored and documented via various [performance indicators]" and the individual goals of scholarship and enquiry displaced by economic considerations. One could be forgiven for describing these sentiments as prophetic.

In the spirit of neoliberalism, the core aims in the UK Government's 2015 HE Green Paper (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2015) are "to raise teaching standards, provide greater focus on graduate employability, widen participation in higher education, and open up the sectors to new high quality entrants". In a similar spirit, The Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) introduced in 2017 is presented as way to better inform students' choices about what and where to study; raise esteem for teaching; recognise



and reward excellent teaching; and better meet the needs of employers, business, industry and the professions (Department for Education, 2017).

According to Radice (2013), UK Universities once tasked with educating the privileged in politics, business, culture and the professions, are now tasked with providing marketable skills and research output to the knowledge economy in a new commercialised model of HE. Measurement of the effectiveness of UK universities in this endeavour is at the route of the 'audit culture' now evident in UK HE, that Apple (2005) suggests is symptomatic of the neoliberal thirst for evidence of efficiency and correctness in operations on the ground. Consequently, there have been changes in the expectations of, and relationships between HE stakeholders, including government, business, society, staff and students of higher education institutions (HEIs) and the trade unions that represent their interests. Students for example, now fee-paying customers of their respective HEI, are demanding 'value for money', a concept new to, and seemingly irreconcilable in the context of HE. UK Universities must compete with a growing number of UK and overseas private HE providers for the custom of UK and International students. Success in this endeavour is largely determined by the standing of the HEI in publicly available, internationally recognised league tables, which in turn is determined largely by student feedback on their experience at the university and subsequent outcomes (degree classification and success in employment terms). As this study will show, the scope of the organisation under study to improve their league table standing beyond a certain point is quite limited. For reasons discussed below however, and despite charging the maximum annual undergraduate tuition fee, the organisation under study has consistently attracted and recruited large numbers of applicants.

### **1.2.3 The organisation under study**

The North West England University under study, referred to hereafter as NWU, is a large, diverse, post-1992 University that provides an ideal context for this study having benefitted in development terms from the neoliberal informed government policies discussed in section 1.2.1. All data in this section are drawn from internal corporate documentation. To preserve the anonymity of those involved, the precise references have not been provided.

NWU was established as a Polytechnic in 1970 and granted university status and degree awarding powers by the Privy Council in 1992 under the provisions of the Further and Higher

Education Act 1992. At the time of writing NWU has six faculties and employs approximately 1,800 academic staff with additional sessional staff providing a wide range of industrial, technical or professional expertise. Approximately 2,200 staff provide support for academic delivery through an integrated set of professional services. NWU has approximately 37,000 students. The majority of these students are full-time UK undergraduates with over 65% under the age of 21. Over 20% of students are from minority ethnic groups, 59% of students are female and 20% are mature learners (over 26 years at the point of enrolment). A number of courses, particularly those in Health and Education-related disciplines, attract students returning to education or engaging in Continuing Professional Development (CPD). Over 10% of NWU students have a disclosed disability, 48% of who report a specific learning difficulty and 19% a mental health condition.

NWU publicly declares a long-standing commitment to widening participation (WP) in HE, driving social mobility within the region. In 2013/14, the academic year higher tuition fees came into effect, 96% of undergraduate (UG) students recruited were from state schools, 19% from low-participation neighbourhoods. Over 40% of home UG students were from households with incomes of less than £25,000. In the same academic year, NWU provided WP students with over £17 million in bursaries and financial support. Since January 2017, NWU has led a National Collaborative Outreach Programme Consortium in a HEFCE funded programme aimed at increasing by 2020, the number of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds participating in HE.

REF2014 results demonstrated significant growth since RAE2008 in the quality of NWU's research output. According to NWU 60% of their outputs were graded 'world leading' or 'internationally excellent' with a 70% rise in the number of NWU researchers attaining the standard.

According to UCAS data, NWU currently attracts the second-highest number of applications. Since the launch in 2011 of a bi-annual internal student survey (ISS), the university's satisfaction rating in the National Student Survey (NSS) has increased from 75% to 85% in 2016. According to NWU, ISS data informs the continuous improvement of its courses. A Student Engagement Monitoring (SEM) Dashboard launched in September 2015 provides

various measures of student engagement including attendance, use of the virtual learning environment and assignment submission.

A Framework to Support Academic Practice and Excellence introduced in 2015/16 incorporates a Peer Support of Teaching Scheme, which involves the observation of professional practice. All staff are offered formal and informal continuing academic professional development opportunities by the University's Centre for Education Learning and Teaching. This training emphasises areas of strategic importance, such as student engagement. A Management Review of Teaching process provides a means of assessing the teaching quality for probationary and established academics. In 2013, NWU introduced a policy aimed at increasing the proportion of PhD (or equivalent) qualified academics recruited to teaching posts. The stated aims of this policy are to assure the delivery of a quality student learning and teaching experience; to ensure that academic staff have the appropriate skills to teach; and to ensure that the curriculum is research focused.

NWU's concerns about SE are evident in a number of policies and practices aimed at encouraging it, such as the Framework to Support Academic Practice and Excellence that aims to ensure tutors are equipped to deal with the student body. Student feedback and results will be the measures of success for this and other SE related initiatives. However, feedback from academic tutors is equally important yet often overlooked. This study will address this oversight.

### **1.3 Research aims and objectives and thesis structure**

As can be seen from the above argument, there is no consensus on the meaning of student engagement (SE), or what drives or presents barriers to it. Whilst there is a tendency within the organisation under study to equate SE with behaviours such as attendance and assessment performance, as Kahu demonstrates, there is considerably more to it than this. Hence, the aims of this study were to explore the meaning tutors attribute to 'student engagement,' and to expose what tutors perceive to be SE drivers and barriers. Additionally the study sought to establish the extent to which tutor perceptions of SE, its drivers and barriers are represented in the SE literature.

In order to achieve these aims the following research objectives were established.

1. To describe how tutors perceive SE
2. To identify the factors that tutors perceive to be SE drivers and barriers
3. To determine the extent to which the tutor voice is represented in the SE literature

The structure of this thesis was designed to address these objectives and is consistent with a thematic analysis methodology (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Chapter 1 (this chapter) outlines the nature and purpose of the study. It offers a justification for the research and orients the reader to the structure of the thesis by locating it within the context UK HE. This chapter therefore provides the background to the research.

Chapter 2 begins to address research objective 3, by examining the perceptions of the nature, drivers and barriers of SE in the literature. It introduces Kahu's (2013) "Conceptual framework of engagement, antecedents and consequences", which provides the structure for Chapter 4 Findings and Discussion.

Chapter 3 is a methodology chapter. It establishes the theoretical underpinnings of the study, and the techniques used in the thematic analysis are explained. This chapter details the various stages of the research process.

Chapter 4 presents and discusses the findings. Thematic analysis requires the concurrent collection and analysis of data. It would therefore be misleading to attempt to disaggregate the data collection and analysis phases in this thesis. Therefore, for reasons of methodological consistency, this chapter addresses research objectives 1, 2 and 3, by interweaving the findings from the thematic analysis with the literature in chapter 2.

Chapter 5 draws conclusions from the key findings of the study, and outlines the resulting contributions to theory and practice thereby addressing the primary research objective of this thesis. It also reflects upon the research questions and methodology, and identifies opportunities for further research.

#### **1.4 Chapter summary**

This chapter has provided an explanation of the background to and purpose of the research. It has described the broad UKHE context in which NWU the local context for the research operates, and introduced the key questions the research sought to address. It also briefly

outlined the content of the following sections of the thesis, before summarising the contributions to knowledge within the research.

In Chapter 2 a review of the SE literature is presented. The review opens with a discussion of the meaning of SE followed by an exploration of the various dimensions of SE evident in the literature. Alternative SE perspectives are then introduced and discussed. The chapter highlights the gaps in the literature, and this provides the underpinning for the rest of the thesis.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to firstly to outline how the extensive SE research literature contributes to understandings of SE in Higher Education, its drivers, barriers and measures, then to assess the extent to which the voice of the academic tutor, a key stakeholder in HE and SE, is represented in this contribution.

### 2.2 Definitions of student engagement

‘Student Engagement’ (SE) is firmly embedded within the UK HE vernacular, without being coherently or comprehensively defined (Parsons and Taylor, 2011; Gibbs, 2014; Vuori, 2014; Groccia, 2018). SE is described as a meta-construct (Fredricks et al. 2004); a concept (Coates, 2005); and a multi-layered construct (Finn 1989). Although this conceptual variety can lead to confusion, by embracing many views the dominance of any one perspective is averted (Zepke, 2015). The example definitions presented in Table 1 illustrate the complexity and evolving nature of SE.

**Table 1 Example ‘Student Engagement’ definitions**

Source	Definition
(Newmann et al. 1992:12)	“a student’s psychological investment in and effort directed toward learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge, skills or crafts that academic work is intended to promote”
(Hu and Kuh, 2002:555)	“the quality of effort students themselves devote to educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to desired outcomes”
(Stefani, 2007:1)	“...the time, energy and resources students devote to activities designed to enhance their learning at university”
(Krause and Coates, 2008:493)	“the extent to which students are engaging in activities that higher education research has shown to be linked with high-quality learning outcomes”
(Kuh, 2009a:683)	“...the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college <i>and</i> what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities”
(Trowler, 2010:3)	“...the interaction between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students and the performance, and reputation of the institution.”
(Kahu, 2013:758)	“An overarching complex and multi-faceted ‘meta-construct’ that aims to draw together diverse threads of research contributing to explanations of student success”

The perception that the student alone is responsible for their engagement and consequent learning is evident in the earlier definitions. Such narrow definitions of SE can lead to the impression that ‘if the student is engaged then the tutor is responsible but if the student is

disengaged then the problem is with the student' Zyngier (2008:1771). The definitions in Table 1 dated 2009 onwards introduce an element of institutional responsibility. Describing engagement as both a process (what institutions do that should be labelled 'engaging students') and an outcome (what students do that should be labelled 'students engaging') Bryson et al. (2010) acknowledge the role of both the institution and the tutor in SE.

The QAA (2012) suggest that the SE definition articulated by a particular Higher Education Institution (HEI) is likely to reflect the context it is operating in and the composition and demographic of its student population. However, the generic rather than institution-specific content of the UK HEI SE definitions presented in Table 2 suggest this is not necessarily the case.

A simple "Student Engagement" search and subsequent more complex searches on other UK HEI websites (University of Bolton, Leeds, Leeds Beckett, Nottingham Trent, Oxford for example) did not retrieve any references to student engagement definitions or webpages. The University of Manchester statement in Table 2 suggests why this might be the case and lends weight to Trowler's (2010) substantive literature review finding that the meaning of SE is assumed rather than known. It seems that whilst research suggests SE can enhance learning outcomes (Krause and Coates, 2008) and the quality of the learning experience (Markwell, 2007) the shared understanding of SE deemed necessary by Kahu (2013) has yet to be achieved.

**Table 2 Example UK HEI 'Student Engagement' definitions**

Source	Definition
The University of Sheffield	<i>"Student engagement in learning and teaching refers to students' active participation in the academic environment resulting in an enhanced learning experience. This may be through involvement with their individual studies, and/or the structures and processes that underpin learning and teaching."</i>
The University of Birmingham	<i>"Student engagement is defined as the range of ways in which students are active participants in shaping their learning experience."</i>
The University of Bradford	<i>"A combination of involvement in the academic and social aspects of higher education level studies. This includes participation in extra and co-curricular activities and access to student and support."</i>
The University of Manchester	<i>"Student Engagement is a term used in a variety of different ways and Manchester is working hard to define what it means for our students and staff."</i>

SE is described by Fredricks et al. (2004) and Kahu (2013) as situational and by Yazzie-Mintz 2007:1 in Appleton et al. (2008) as the outcome of the interplay between the individual and the context rather than a "solo activity". The attitudes and behaviours that SE entails can be affected by teachers and parents (Wilms 2003 in Zyngier, 2008). In a similar vein Appleton et al. (2008) and (Kahu, 2013) suggest SE is about relationships, which according to Fredricks et al. (2004) makes it potentially malleable and more easily changed; a transient state rather than an individual trait or general tendency (Fredricks et al. 2004; Kahu, 2013).

A more instrumental, economic perspective evident in the SE literature is attributed by Zepke (2015) to the economic realities generated by the demands of a knowledge-based economy. McMahon and Portelli (2012) allude to echoes of neoliberal assumptions in the technical and operational rationality of the economic SE perspective. Zepke (2015:703) goes further by suggesting 'Student engagement could be seen as a 'hard wired' and necessary consequence of neoliberal hegemony'.

Whilst Thomas (2012) links the prominence of SE to its unequivocal connection with student success, Zepke (2015:703) suggests its 'focus on student success, quality, belonging and even well-being and active citizenship finds strong echoes in neoliberal thought and government policies. The SE/neoliberalism association is further explored below.



Whilst the use of the term SE is pervasive in UK HE, the discussion in section 2.2 lends weight to Parson and Taylor's (2011) claim that SE is not coherently or comprehensively defined. While engagement is often equated to the time and effort students invest in educationally purposeful activities, definitions reveal a broadening of the SE concept away from the narrow student-only focus. Over time, research has expanded the concept to include an institutional focus. Engagement is presented as an individual, transient, potentially malleable state (See Coates, 2007), the nature of which is determined by the interplay between the student and the context (Yazzie-Mintz 2007:1 in Appleton et al. 2008; Fredricks et al. 2004; Kahu, 2013).

In summary, there is little evidence of shared understanding of SE in the literature reviewed, and across the university websites visited. SE definitions have evolved over the last 25 years in particular in relation to the introduction of shared student/institution responsibility for SE. Suggestions that SE is contextual (Fredricks et al. 2004; Kahu, 2013; QAA, 2012) and therefore subject to change might explain to some degree the apparent lack of consensus, but they also point to opportunities for HEIs invest time in furthering their understanding of this undeniably important and seemingly malleable concept. This study will elucidate how tutors understand SE and provide an understanding of the level of consensus amongst them.

In the following section, the literature concerning many aspects of SE is reviewed and discussed. This significant body of literature substantiates the claim that SE remains an important area for research about learning and teaching in formal higher education (Astin, 1993; Zepke, 2015).

## **2.3 Dimensions of student engagement**

### **2.3.1 Introduction**

SE is commonly discussed in terms of its behavioural, emotional and cognitive dimensions. This tripartite conceptualisation (Appleton et al. 2008) illustrates the multi-faceted nature of SE (Kahu, 2013). The behavioural dimension is concerned with student interactions and participation in academic, in-class, and non-academic, social, extracurricular activities. It is also concerned with persistence and compliance with institutional structures (H. A. Davis et al. 2012).

The emotional/affective (Fredricks et al. 2004; Kahu, 2013; Quin et al. 2017) or relational (Davis et al. 2012) dimension, is concerned with positive attitudes, reactions and interactions inside and outside of the classroom, and feelings of connection towards school, tutors, learning, and peers (Baron and Corbin, 2012). According to Harris (2008) emotional engagement does not guarantee learning; a student who feels connected to their university is not impervious to failure.

The cognitive dimension, which appears to be the dimension most strongly linked to learning (Harris, 2008) concerns a student's 'psychological involvement in learning e.g. perceptions of competency, willingness to engage in effortful learning and task-oriented goals' (Archambault et al. 2009:409). It is also concerned with a student's strategic and self-regulating personal investment in learning (Davis et al. 2012) through for example task-planning and memorisation (Archambault et al. 2009), and ownership of learning (Davis et al. 2012). Prerequisites of the cognitive dimension are the behavioural and emotional dimensions (R. Gibbs and Poskitt, 2010).

### **2.3.2 The behavioural dimension**

Behavioural engagement is an umbrella term covering a range of behaviours that includes class attendance, participation and other interactions in class and in extra-curricular academic, non-academic and social activities. Cook (2012) suggests that a student who attends academic and social activities associated with the course, and completes and submits assessments, will benefit from their HE experience. Behavioural engagement features in most definitions of SE and is subject to a variety of measures (Fredricks et al. 2011). Kahu (2013) identifies an emphasis in the behavioural engagement literature on the effectiveness of teaching practice; the impact of student behaviour and the levels of student satisfaction educated. Student satisfaction is often measured through surveys whose validity according to Kahu (2013) is sometimes questioned. Behavioural engagement is also concerned with compliance with institutional structures and persistence (Davis et al. 2012). The literature concerning a range of these behaviours is now considered.

Student disengagement, however that presents itself (problematic behaviour or withdrawal for example), might according to Zyngier (2008) be symptomatic of a failure by the institution to enable the student to achieve their potential. Further discussion on the nature and

outcome of the less positive activities and actions that students sometimes engage in such as lecture absenteeism (Moore et al. 2008), irregular in-class attendance, non-attentiveness in class, creating disturbances in class (Rahman and Khaleque, 1996) can be found in 'academic behaviour' literature.

### **2.3.2.1 Attendance**

Markwell (2007) identifies attendance amongst the 'elements of engagement' that are often treated as synonymous with engagement and common measures of SE. Its contribution to improved academic performance is well documented (see for example Crede et al. 2010; Hughes, 2009; Latif and Miles, 2013; Romer, 1993). However, anecdotal evidence, and a sizeable body of related literature (see for example Bos et al. 2016; Christie et al. 2004; Crede et al. 2010; Hughes, 2009; Isbell and Cote, 2009; Latif and Miles, 2013; MacFarlane, 2013; Moore et al. 2008; Reschly and Christenson, 2006; Romer, 1993; van der Meer, 2012), suggests that low levels of attendance are not uncommon and a cause of some concern across the UK HE sector. According to McKeachie (1999 in Isbell and Cote, 2009), attendance at large lectures falls off throughout the term, often down to between 30 and 40% by the end of term. Moore et al. (2008) support the introduction of mandatory measuring of lecture attendance though suggest that the link between lecture attendance (a potential barometer of student motivation) and academic performance is neither linear nor automatic.

Many HEIs have introduced attendance policies, which vary in nature and enforcement across and within the institutions. The arguments put forward by institutions for the introduction of such policies are categorised by MacFarlane (2013) as 'accountability to society', 'student well-being', and 'preparation for the workplace'.

The 'accountability to society' argument draws attention to economic investment in higher education by a range of stakeholders including the student, and the importance of completion, which is in effect the return on the investment (MacFarlane, 2013). UK Universities also have a legal duty to report to the UK Border Agency (UKBA) any breach of the Tier 4 visa requirements i.e. when a student studying in the UK under a Tier 4 Visa misses ten consecutive working days or ten learning contacts.

According to MacFarlane (2013) monitoring an attendance policy facilitates any pastoral needs a student might have and provides the university with a moral case for its imposition. The 'student well-being' argument also links regular attendance with improved academic performance.

The grounds for the 'preparation for the workplace' argument are that in the 'real world' employees have no choice but to attend and are expected to be punctual (MacFarlane, 2013). On courses linked to professional bodies, 'covering' the curriculum is often considered essential.

In light of evidence suggesting individuals with high class attendance and a high number of completed assignments perform very well in midterm examinations, Latif and Miles (2013) suggest that attendance is incentivised. Assigning a certain percentage of grades for class attendance and the use of online assignments in class are proposed (Latif and Miles, 2013).

The findings of studies into the attendance behaviour and assessment outcomes for students on economics courses are instructive though not conclusive in their evaluation of the impact of attendance on attainment. Marburger (2006) for example found that absenteeism reduced significantly, and exam performance improved, when a mandatory attendance policy was enforced. Dobkin et al. 2009 in Broker et al. (2014) found that an enforced mandatory attendance policy introduced for economics students who had underachieved in their mid-term assessments improved attendance in the second half of the term and improved performance in a subsequent assessment. In contrast, Crede et al. (2010) found nothing to suggest mandatory attendance policies had a positive impact on grades. Ben-Eliyahu et al. (2018), who define engagement as "the intensity of productive involvement with an activity" suggest that whilst attendance is an immediate prerequisite of engagement, it is not an indicator of the quality of engagement during learning.

UKHE is a post-compulsory system that students, many who are part-time and/or mature, enter through choice rather than compulsion (MacFarlane, 2013). The moral and philosophical grounds for mandatory attendance are therefore less clear. Required attendance removes "*choice and judgement about the value of personal time and how this is best spent*" from students who are now (or will eventually be) paying their own tuition fees

(MacFarlane, 2013:366). It also contradicts the often-stated commitment of universities to develop independent learners (MacFarlane, 2013). That said, Broker et al. (2014) found that the offer of good attendance bonus points that were relatively inconsequential in value terms, did in fact improve attendance.

The enthusiasm for providing recorded lectures, a practice evident in some UK universities, was varied amongst the Exeter et al. (2010:772) research participants one of whom suggested “I’m not going to give them some half-pie recorded version that they can sit at home and watch and not come to my lecture.”

Moore et al. (2008) opine that in an environment where enhanced information access and information technology are prolific and independent study and self-directed learning are actively encouraged, there is a need to explain the continuing role and importance of lecture attendance in the enhancement of academic performance. According to Moore et al. (2008) lectures are a convenient episode during which tutors can provide students with information and orientations they are less able or likely to access outside these scheduled teaching times. It is during lectures that the rules of engagement are explained which help students “to understand the areas and tasks that they need to focus on most in order to navigate their learning experiences more successfully” Moore et al. (2008:17). Timetabled sessions may also provide structure in a potentially unstructured student schedule (Moore et al. 2008).

Moore et al. (2008) highlight also the importance of understanding underlying rather than just stated reasons for non-attendance. Marburger (2006) for example highlights the potential impact of the scheduled time of the session with better-attended mid-morning than late afternoon sessions. “Distance between school and home” and “whether the student has a car” are also proposed as instruments for a “Class Attendance” variable with the expectation that distance is negatively correlated and having a car is positively correlated with class attendance (Marburger, 2006).

Ultimately, students have to weigh up the perceived opportunity cost or expected value of attending a lecture or undertaking preparatory reading which, depending on the outcome, can be drivers or barriers to engagement (Moore et al. 2008).

### **2.3.2.2 Participation in class**

Pratton and Hales (1986:211) define active in-class participation as ‘the result of a deliberate and conscious attempt on the part of a teacher to cause students to participate overtly in a lesson’. Research suggests however that the relationship between engagement and participation in class is not always positively correlated. The learning context for Confucian heritage peoples for example is, normally, one that calls for courtesy (Chanock, 2010) and silence. Wilkinson and Olliver-Gray (2006) note that amongst Confucian heritage students silence might be a genuine effort to understand material encountered and a more effective learning strategy than precipitous attempts to appropriate and redeploy it. There is therefore a need for teachers to be aware of the different meanings of silence to different cultures (Wilkinson and Olliver-Gray, 2006).

Responding in class in particular has been positively associated with gains in academic achievement (Greenwood et al. 1984; Narayan et al. 1990) which, according to Graham et al. (2007), is shown in educational research to positively influence the learning process. This has potential implications for the more reticent student including those of Confucian heritage. In classes where opportunities for students to respond are limited, Graham et al. (2007) suggest the balance is potentially tipped in favour of the most knowledgeable students who are most willing to respond in front of their peers. Anecdotally, Foster et al. (2009) found that some low responders claimed to learn best by listening, suggesting the class experience might be differentially beneficial for participants and low responders. Students need to be reassured that listening and participating are entirely compatible and that effective communication must include effective listening (Erway 1972; Porat 1990 in Foster et al. 2009).

Despite the importance attributed to in-class participation Caspi et al. (2008) note a wealth of research indicating most students do not participate. Weaver and Qi (2005) reported that approximately 25% of students participate in class discussion, with only 12% doing so regularly. Caspi et al. (2006) earlier reported that about 55% of students never or rarely participated in class and that women more than men avoided participation in classroom discussions. Harper and Quaye (2009) distinguish between involvement and engagement, claiming that engagement entails action, purpose and cross-institutional collaboration, and involvement does not (Baron and Corbin, 2012).

Foster et al. (2009) observe that the vitality of class discussion is weakened by silence and leaves the ability to express one's views in group situations, an important professional skill, underdeveloped in low responders. Foster et al. (2009) further note an absence of research into the reliability of in-class participation as a predictor of course performance whilst noting the likelihood of it enhancing learning.

In the expectancy-value framework, the intrinsic value of a task results from a decision-making process in which the student takes into consideration the importance of doing well on a specific task, the personal interest of the content of the task, and its usefulness in relation to future personal goals, as well as the cost or the perceived negative aspects of engaging in this task (Eccles and Wigfield, 1995; Wigfield and Eccles, 1992).

Reeve and Tseng (2011:258) introduced the concept of agentic engagement, which they define as "students' constructive contribution into the flow of the instruction they receive". According to (Reeve and Tseng, 2011) agentic engagement potentially enhances the linear process implied by the behavioural, emotional and cognitive components of SE by offering students the opportunity to intentionally and proactively personalize and enrich what they learn and the conditions under which they learn it. This however requires an autonomy supportive classroom environment in which students feel free to communicate their interests and to express opinions and ask questions about the teaching they receive (Reeve and Tseng, 2011). Agentic agency is likely to be problematic for low responders.

### **2.3.2.3 Independent study**

Lau (2017) identifies the cultivation of independent or autonomous learners as a concern of UK HEIs. According to (Gieve and Clark, 2005) the effectiveness of this method of learning is largely dependent on the perceptions and commitment of the teachers and students involved. The multidimensional yet elusive character of independent learning has rendered its assessment challenging, if not impossible. More specifically, the extent to which an individual's independence or autonomy develops may need to be measured indirectly through observing change in behaviour or performance over time. Grodner and Rupp (2013) report that homework is often not assigned because according to most of the tutors they surveyed at the seven largest public universities in North Carolina, it required too much of their time. Lau (2017) cautions against the impulse to discard or shy away from promoting

independent learning simply because of pre-existing conditions that cannot be changed (e.g. a student's current approaches to learning informed by previous learning experiences). Instead, Lau (2017) suggests working around these constraints and creating a pedagogically effective context that enables independent learning to be implemented and evaluated.

The literature on 'homework', the term for 'independent study' in primary and secondary education, is informative. In a study of the relationship between attitudes to homework and outcomes for foreign language students Chang et al. (2014) focus on homework assigned by a tutor rather than homework in a more general sense including any study undertaken at home or outside the classroom. The equivalent in HE could be a set task with a deadline (e.g. a piece of assessed coursework) versus encouraged reading from the unit reading list. Although Chang et al. (2014) note that broadly, time spent on homework increases achievement, in concert their assessment of the findings of the studies reviewed are not conclusive, and demonstrate a lack of clarity around the effects of several predictors including intellectual ability, quality of instruction, academic motivation, quantity of academic coursework, time spent on homework and subject discipline. Of particular interest to this study is the suggestion in (Cooper et al. 1998) that as students mature and perform more self-regulated learning their attitudes toward homework may play a more important role in achievement.

#### **2.3.2.4 Engagement in extra-curricular activities**

Engagement with 'extra-curricular' activities appears in most of the SE definitions listed in Table 1. The explicit or implied meaning of 'extra-curricular' activities in these definitions informs the interpretation in this literature review i.e. educationally purposeful, academic, non-academic or social activities over and above a degree scheme. The limited and relatively recent literature on engagement in extra-curricular activities in UKHE considers engagement with such activities predominantly in terms of its impact on employability (See for example Clegg et al. 2010; Thompson et al. 2013; Stevenson and Clegg, 2011; Clark et al. 2015; Stuart et al. 2011). Student feedback, survey data and the views of a limited number of employers, on the employability outcomes of engagement with extra-curricular activities predominate in this research. A single university study by Clegg et al. (2010:615) report a "blurring of boundaries" in academic tutor conceptions of the curricular and extracurricular. What an academic tutor deems to be within the scope of the curriculum is determined by what they



deem to be extracurricular, that is to say supplementary to the formal curriculum, and for many tutors, directly organised or initiated by staff at the institution (Clegg et al. 2010). Other tutors made a clear distinction between work experience that is part of the curriculum (a sandwich year industrial placement for example) and voluntary engagement with for example paid and unpaid work outside of the curriculum (Clegg et al. 2010). Clegg et al. (2010) note acknowledgement amongst the academic tutors interviewed that for economic reasons many students are in paid employment, continue to meet their caring and faith obligations, and live at home. This acknowledgement according to Clegg et al. (2010), challenges the discursively positioned full-time funded white, able-bodied, normatively male and single UKHE student, without caring responsibilities. There is no real justification in the literature for including engagement with extra-curricular activities in definitions of SE particularly if the wider definition of ECAs is adopted e.g. paid employment and caring responsibilities though their contribution to the development of essential employability skills is evident.

#### **2.3.2.5 Measures of student engagement**

Measurement is identified by Grealy and Laurie (2017:459) as ‘one of the most recognizable components of neo-liberalism’. Performativity and accountability have an elective infinity with student engagement. Student Engagement has become synonymous with quality in Higher Education (HE) and consequently the focus of government sponsored student surveys around the globe including the Australian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE), the US and Canadian National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the UK NSS.

‘To ensure that management and performance in the neoliberal market performs in acceptable ways, the state introduces audit measures that enable it to monitor standards of performance’ (Zepke, 2015:701).

Beerkens (2015) notes that because of global competition in HE, a university’s ability to attract international students has significant financial implications. Universities are therefore mindful of their international reputation and performance in university rankings which according to Beerkens (2015:243) “emerge as very powerful instruments in steering the market”.

Engagement is a dynamic continuum with different locations (task, classroom, course, institution), and therefore not measurable by surveys but best understood through in-depth qualitative work (Bryson, et al 2010 in Kahu, 2013; Porter, 2011) such as the research reported here.

National Student Surveys introduced in Australasia, North America and Canada since the turn of the last century aim to measure levels of student engagement, to identify aspects of the student experience requiring improvement, and areas where universities and colleges are performing well. The UK National Student Survey (NSS), introduced in 2005, is concerned with public accountability and provides information on teaching quality to inform future student study choices. The NSS gathers data on mainly final year undergraduate student perceptions of their experience throughout their course in relation to teaching, assessment and feedback, academic support, organisation and management, learning resources, and personal development (Cheng and Marsh, 2010). The NSS does not, nor was it intended to provide information on educational gains (Gibbs, 2010; Surridge, 2009). The NSS is open to students at all publicly funded Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in England, Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland, and to directly funded Higher Education students at Further Education Colleges (FECs) in England and Further Education Institutions (FEIs) in Wales. In April 2018, overall responsibility for the NSS transferred from HEFCE to the Office for Students.

Although the reliability of the UK NSS data has been challenged (Cheng and Marsh, 2010; Porter, 2011) the subsequent analyses once it is available in the public domain, can be used by stakeholders and any other interested parties to benchmark the featured institutions in relation to the domains (or themes) the survey collected data on. Langan et al. (2013) highlight the importance of appropriate performance comparisons in institutional decision-making. Although subject performance might be more appropriately compared with national subject rather than institutional averages, national subject averages, may be subject to error if courses contain different compositions of learners, for example in terms of ethnicity (Langan et al. 2013:205).

Engagement and quality are concepts with many possible meanings and subject to constant change; therefore engagement survey findings are problematic. The engagement surveys

that claim to provide insights into the quality of the education provided by participating institutions have a single definition of engagement even though engagement is a much deeper and more complex process than pictured in the surveys (Hagel et al. 2012).

Whilst the link between any measure of engagement and academic performance must be examined (Moore et al. 2008) the evidence that teaching and learning varies across disciplines raises questions over the usefulness of a single survey instrument spanning all disciplines (Nelson Laird et al 2008 in Kahu, 2013). The snapshot of engagement that the survey instrument provides misses much of the complexity of this dynamic and situational construct (Kahu, 2013) obscuring the respondents voice by accommodating only those perspectives that fit the predefined questions (Bryson and Hardy, 2011). According to Kahu (2013) student engagement surveys do not capture the dynamic nature of engagement and have a tendency to limit the voices of the participants.

In HE, student evaluation is a widely used and integral element of course development and delivery although, it is argued, with an administrative and management focus rather than with a focus on the improvement of learning and teaching (Maringe and Sing, 2014). It is also suggested that student responses on the end of instruction course evaluation forms are rarely used for improvement of the course and tend to be filed away safely used only to inform promotion and tenure decisions (see for example Marsh 2007 in Maringe and Sing, 2014).

Coates (2005) stresses the importance of factoring SE information in to university education quality determinations, and questions the value of quality assurance approaches that exclude it. According to Coates (2005) there is an overemphasis on institutional information (resources and reputation that have little to do with pedagogy for example), and teaching information (focused mainly on the evaluation of teaching *processes*). Whilst institutions and tutors provide resources and opportunities to promote and make possible specific kinds of interactions, students need to interact with these conditions and activities in ways that will lead to productive learning (Coates, 2005). A student surrounded by impressive resources will not automatically attend classes or participate in activities that engage them in authentic learning (Kuh 2002 in Coates, 2005).

It has been considered an educational truism that the most exciting learning experiences are hard to measure (Grealy and Laurie, 2017:459). Measurement has the power to bring different worlds into being such that those sceptical about the metrics used to measure institutional progress can become to care about and even desire certain numbers (Grealy and Laurie, 2017). Universities are not necessarily overpopulated by individuals committed to neo-liberalism ('neo-liberals'), but they do mould individual habits and orientations to be more compliant with the marketized turbulences of academic life (Grealy and Laurie, 2017:464).

The development of proxy indicators and probabilistic inferences (see Shachter, 1988) to measure large groups – students, workers, voters – can often produce measurements more useful for the governance of a population than for assisting the practices or improving the well-being of any particular individual within that population. Measurement practices simultaneously reflect and modify relationships between those who measure and those who are measured (Grealy and Laurie, 2017:460). Numbers begin signifying more easily as reliable 'proof' once they circulate beyond an original 'circle of belief' – that is, those who actually produced the numbers (Kamuf, 2007, p. 257). The marketisation of higher education does frequently punish those programmes that cannot point towards tangible vocational outcomes, and in Marxist terms, prioritizes the interests of capital investment over the quality of living for those who labour (Grealy and Laurie, 2017:463). Massification, marketisation and internationalization have underpinned significant changes in Western universities since the Second World War (Grealy and Laurie, 2017:466).

### **2.3.3 The emotional dimension**

The emotional (Fredricks et al. 2004), affective (Kahu, 2013; Lawson and Lawson, 2013) or relational H. A. Davis et al. (2012) dimension of SE is concerned with a student's positive attitudes, reactions and interactions inside and outside of the classroom including feelings of connection towards learning, one's peers, the institution and its tutors (Baron and Corbin, 2012). It is therefore concerned with feelings of belonging, identity and the interpersonal relationships that satisfy the need to belong.

#### **2.3.3.1 Belonging**

Engagement can lead to the feeling of belonging that is critical to student retention and success in higher education (Thomas, 2012).

Anderson et al (2009) draws on organisational research into employee turnover in order to identify alternative ways to improve retention and encourage persistence amongst HE students through the management of student expectations from recruitment through to enrolment and following induction. Applied in an education context, Transition Theory (Sargent and Schlossberg, 1988) focuses on a student's responses to events, so called transitions that alter to varying degrees their roles, routines, assumptions, and relationships. The effective 'management' of the student is dependent on tutors' knowledge and understanding of the transition the student is in and the stage within the transition they have reached. According to Sargent and Schlossberg (1988) at the start of a transition (moving from college to university for example) the feelings of belonging are replaced with feelings of isolation or alienation and this is where orientation and support are needed. Students who experience feelings of disenfranchisement during transition due to a preoccupation with feelings of inadequacy and incompetence can be assisted by the tutor's acknowledgment of the difficulties associated with transition, and support and advice on how to acquire the necessary competencies. Tutors can also offer advice on appropriate support networks or mentors such as the student support services offered by the university.

Also relevant in an HE context is Louis' (1980) research into the coping strategies new employees adopt when entering unfamiliar organisational settings. Organisational Socialisation is *"the process by which an individual comes to appreciate the values, abilities, expected behaviors, and social knowledge essential for assuming an organizational role and for participating as an organizational member"* (Louis, 1980:229-230). Students are as likely as employees to experience what Louis (1980) describes as the disorientation, foreignness, and a sort of sensory overload that characterise the early stages of the socialisation experience, i.e. enrolling for the first time at university. During the subsequent encounter stage (drawing parallels between class attendance and working 'on the job') the new student learns to cope with any differences between their expectations and the reality of the new setting. The so-called adaptation state occurs when the insider role is assumed. In an HE or organisational context there is a need for ability, motivation, and an understanding of what others expect in order to perform adequately in this role (Brim 1966 in Louis, 1980). An appreciation of the major features of the entry experience could be key to the design and delivery of successful student recruitment and induction strategies. These include 'change'

(adjusting to a new setting), 'contrast' (letting go of an old role, school or college student for example) and 'surprise' (positive and negative differences between anticipated and actual experiences in the new setting) (Louis, 1980).

van der Meer (2012) draws attention to a change in research emphasis from assimilation of students into higher education to active adaptation of the institution to students, particularly first-year undergraduates, who enter higher education. Adaptation involves explicit tutor explanations of how the university works and the rationale for what is expected of students. Confirmation that students' understanding is as intended addresses any disjuncture between expectations and experience, alleviating potential confusion and dissatisfaction (van der Meer, 2012). Clarity of understanding is particularly important for students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds who must be afforded equal access to, as well as equitable participation in the tertiary system's learning process (Anderson 2002). Van der Meer's (2012) research highlights the importance for first year tutors in particular of communicating to students the purpose and relevance of what we do in lectures and tutorials, and how we do it. "Few assumptions can be made as to what students will 'just' understand" (van der Meer, 2012:89). The first year at university is a transition period characterised by students acquainting themselves with the way the institution is and operates (van der Meer, 2012), a process also referred as 'academic socialisation' (Brawer, 1996) and "enculturation into the life and practices of the university" (Katanis, 2000b:103).

### **2.3.3.2 Student identity**

Identity, an important factor in student learning, is closely related to engagement, motivation and self-efficacy, which are all key determinants of student learning (Wilson et al. 2015). Student identity is important because it is concerned with the extent to which a student feels they fit in to their chosen HE Institution (Reay et al. 2010). According to (Reay et al. 2010), race, gender and social class are aspects of identity that can be modified, reinforced or transformed by the university experience, in particular within the processes through which the student's learner identity is developed. In considering the effects of university on the formation of a student's identity, Kaufman (2014) argues that university is a social rather than an individual experience. Kaufman (2014) also questions the understanding of identity as "an individually based achievement". Drawing on the sociological theory of symbolic interactionism Kaufman (2014) suggests identity is more appropriately understood as a

process of identity formation involving both personal and social identities. Whilst personal identity is concerned with self-declarations or avowals ('I am a diligent student'), the basis of social identity is "the imputations that others make towards us", which Kaufman (2014:37) argues, is a more accurate description of who we are. Kaufman's (2014) research considered the strategies students adopted (ways of behaving, speaking or socialising for example) in order to achieve membership of a social group (a key component of social identity formation) that represented their desired social identity. The significance of the college experience in a students' intellectual and emotional development is evident in Kaufman's (2014) research. Kaufman (2014) and Martin et al. (2014) regard the formulation of a positive student identity as a vital stage in the journey to achievement in HE.

The adoption of a student identity, once seen as a natural part of the traditional student transition to university, may no longer be so for the online, or part-time, or returning to study, or working, students (L. Martin et al. 2014). These so-called 'hybrid' students may already have identities informed by their work and life experiences up to the point of entry into HE, making them less malleable than students entering directly from school (Martin et al. 2014). (Holmes, 2013) suggests that students may find themselves situated in an indeterminate identity zone until their claims on a chosen identity are affirmed by academics. Struggles in the 'detached' university environment that mature aged students in particular are likely to be confronted with (Buultjens and Robinson, 2011) include a lack of critical background knowledge and skills (Leder and Forgasz 2004) limited academic skills and uneasiness when dealing with younger students (Yorke, 2000).

Research has suggested that the impact of student characteristics and background on retention rates is significant (Marsh, 2014). Student-related discussions often refer without explanation to the advantaged or disadvantaged, traditional or non-traditional student. The assignation of the deficits associated with the 'non-traditional' or 'disadvantaged' student status is problematic because it places students in oppositional categories (Barrow, 2011) that pathologise the students concerned as "deficient" by constantly comparing them to something else or better (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003). In reality, and regardless of the extent to which they match certain criteria, whether a student feels traditional or non-traditional depends on a whole range of factors. Whilst an exploration of the ambiguity inherent in these concepts is outside the scope of this research, within scope is an exploration

of the HE experience of the “intended beneficiaries of widening participation-type policies” who have “suffered structural disadvantage or historic exclusion and who continue to be underrepresented in higher education” Trowler (2015:298). The list, though not exhaustive, includes working-class students, first-in-family students, students from minority ethnic groups, religious-affiliated students groups, mature students, students with caring responsibilities, students with disabilities, LGBT students” (Trowler, 2015). Notwithstanding the difficulties associated with these student categories or assignments, it is imperative that NWU and its tutors recognise, understand the needs of and support appropriately the significant numbers of WP students within their student body. This research will provide an indication of the extent to which this is actually the case.

Banks (1993) proposes the notion of multiple acculturation, which promotes cross-cultural competency among students of different cultural backgrounds. This involves the provision of a multicultural education that enables individuals from mainstream and minority cultural groups to live and participate proficiently in a multicultural society (Ogbu 1992); the inclusion of minority culture content within the curriculum rendering it culturally responsive; the embedding of ‘cultural diversity’ within the curriculum thereby ensuring the affirmation of differences in the educational needs of minority cultures and students from marginalised cultural backgrounds (Gibson 1976).

Wide ranging research by Bainbridge and Lasley (2002) into the impact of demographic diversity (a controversial and much criticised term considered more encompassing than cultural diversity) on cognitive ability and academic performance found that race and gender had no real influence and variables such as parent education level, quality of diet, and access to stimulating environments were directly more related to the ability of individual students to learn. Stefani (2008) advocates moving beyond ‘the rhetoric of diversity’ towards the interrogation of its meaning in ‘a mass higher education system’.

First-in-family students, and particularly those with friends in a similar situation, face a number of challenges. Students The experience of others that students can draw on to inform their choice of institution, course of study and their expectations of the whole university experience is likely to be limited. Without the experience of siblings to draw on, the vital role that parents can play in student decision-making will not be possible (Moogan,



2012). Cultural barriers such as hostility from parents and peers are also more likely (Callendar, 2003) than the strong emotional support from family required to help the student to succeed (Christie et al. 2001). Given the financial realities of attending university, support and encouragement is more likely in the environment of students from advantaged backgrounds with university graduated parents and friends (Cooke et al. 2004).

Forsyth and Furlong (2003) found that the university choice of students from disadvantaged backgrounds was influenced by the extent to which they felt similar to other students enrolled there. Cultural differences create significant barriers to engagement for many students, in particular non-traditional students (Thomas, 2002) whose experience of starting university has been described as a culture shock (Christie et al. 2008), learning shock (Griffiths et al. 2005), and feeling like 'a fish out of water' (Thomas, 2002:431). Sullivan (2001:893) usefully explains Bourdieu's notion of 'cultural capital' in relation to educational attainment, as "familiarity with the dominant culture within a society, and especially the ability to understand and use 'educated language'". According to Bourdieu, the widespread inefficiency in pedagogic transmission within the educational system, and higher education in particular, is a consequence of an erroneous presupposition of the possession of cultural capital that is in fact possessed by a minority (Bourdieu 1977). Yosso (2005) cautions against 'deficit thinking', whereby students are stigmatised for not possessing or lacking relevant cultural capital, noting Bourdieu's observation that in a hierarchical society the knowledges of the upper and middle-classes are considered valuable capital. 'Outsider knowledge', which Yosso (2005) characterises as 'community cultural wealth', should also be recognised and valued. As noted in Lareau and Weininger (2003:598), 'A given possession only becomes capital if a market has been constructed in which that possession is demanded and therefore can yield a return'.

Findings from The Student Transition And Retention (STAR) project suggest a mismatch between the course and the student's expectations on entry, which are often cited by first year students as the reason for leaving university (Walsh et al. 2009). To encourage SE, and avoid feelings of alienation and disenfranchisement amongst the student body, institutional knowledge systems must connect to and engage with the cultural knowledge, histories and experiences that the students bring with them. According to (Stefani, 2008), consideration

needs to be given to student's pre-HE experiences because they may affect their intrinsic motivation to understand university level learning. If institutions do not actually know and understand what students bring with them, the development of an equitable environment in which the student feels a sense of entitlement, belonging and identification will be hindered (Zyngier, 2008). Defining the best learning environment for engaging a growing and increasingly diverse student population with a range of entry qualifications in the learning process is problematic (Stefani, 2008). There is for example no guarantee that students will immediately buy into the traditions and culture of the institution and they are unlikely to automatically understand the aims and assumptions of disciplinary specialists (Haggis). Zyngier (2008) advises against the inadvertent development of a deficit discourse that presents students as the problem (with SE), and a deficit pedagogy designed to accommodate an assumed disengaged student body or cohort.

#### **2.3.3.3 Academic entitlement**

Peirone and Maticka-Tyndale (2016) note increasing interest in the concept of academic entitlement among social scientists in higher education (Chowning and Campbell 2009; Ciani et al. 2008; Lippmann et al. 2009; Morrow 1994; Singleton-Jackson et al. 2011). Academic entitlement is "the attitude that one is indebted academic success in the absence of personal effort to earn that success" (Boswell, 2012:353). This presents an interesting juxtaposition to Astin's (1993 in Bovill et al. 2016) claim that success is driven by student-student interaction, student-faculty interaction and time on task. Morrow (1994) explores academic entitlement within the framework of apartheid education in South Africa describing the sense of entitlement as a shift from valuing learning towards valuing achievement in the sense of achieving a grade or a degree regardless of whether learning takes place. According to Morrow (1994) a sense of entitlement leads to the conclusion that the fault for student failure lies with "the teachers, the curriculum, the institution, or more vaguely, the 'system'" (p. 35). Students display attitudes from wanting to control tuition fees and the number of exams for a course (Singleton-Jackson et al. 2010, p. 354) to controlling what grade they will receive (Ciani et al. 2008, p.333) essentially wanting or feeling entitled to control their entire educational experience (Morrow 1994). This mode of existence where students seek to 'have a degree' rather than 'be learners' is promoted by the current higher education (HE) market discourse (Molesworth et al. 2009). The consequent "reconceptualization of student as

‘consumers’ within a managerialist and marketised higher education environment” has according to Bovill et al. (2016:197) had a significant influence upon SE. However, the relevance of the ‘student as customer’ metaphor and appropriateness of the HE market discourse is not universally acknowledged according to Woodall et al. (2014) especially, perhaps, amongst academics (Lomas 2007).

#### **2.3.4 The cognitive dimension**

Cognitive engagement according to (Davis et al. 2012) is a matter of students’ will. “It is how students feel about themselves and their work, their skills, and the strategies they employ to master their work”.

Pickering (2017) describes the cognitively engaged student as invested in their learning, embracing the challenge of acquiring new knowledge or skill sets, and going beyond the course requirements. The tangible outcomes this delivers for the student is a full understanding of the course learning objectives and an awareness of the available resources to help them achieve these objectives. Thus, the student is able to make informed decisions about what needs to be learned, what learning materials are available and how they are appropriately used. Pickering (2017:822) postulates that it is “cognitive, rather than emotional and behavioural engagement that is the key domain in supporting effective learning”.

According to Ben-Eliyahu et al. (2018), the learning processes associated with cognitive engagement tend to include a self-regulated learning component and/or a motivational component such as desire for effort exertion. Ignoring these self-regulated and motivational learning processes reduces cognitive engagement to simply thinking and paying attention (Ben-Eliyahu et al. 2018). However, motivation, self-efficacy and expected outcome are engagement antecedents that a university can influence (Bandura, 1997; Linnenbrink and Pintrich, 2002; Nilsen, 2009).

To illustrate the importance of cognitive engagement, Pickering (2017) challenges engagement judgements based only on behavioural data. Such judgements are limited to the behavioural data collected whereas students may be accessing other resources that are out

of the field of view, and therefore invisible to the tracking system (Pickering, 2017). In relation to emotional engagement, Pickering (2017) suggests that a student exhibiting a sense of interest in class, smiling and laughing, would be viewed as emotionally engaged, but if they sit quietly and appear, on the surface, disinterested, they would be viewed as unengaged. In Pickering's (2017) experience, it happens far too often to be an exception, that students who despite appearing to be engaged emotionally, fail their assessments.

#### **2.3.4.1 Motivation**

Motivation is sometimes treated as synonymous with, or different from, but closely related to 'engagement' (Appleton et al. 2008; Markwell, 2007). There is however a discernible view in the literature that this should not be the case. According to The Department of Education Science and Training, studies continue to show that students may be motivated but disengaged. According to Hospel et al. (2016) motivation is an antecedent of engagement and fuels the reactions associated with engagement for example, the way a student feels, thinks, behaves in class and the effort they expend on their studies. 'Motivation' is deemed by Maehr and Meyer (1997) to be at the core of teaching and learning. Motivation is, according to (Astin, 1984) a psychological construct that is susceptible to direct observation and measurement.

Motivation theory is traditionally concerned with what initiates behaviour, what maintains behaviour (Eccles and Wigfield, 1995; Wigfield and Eccles, 1992) and "what causes behaviour to stop" (Moore et al. 2008:18). In contrast engagement reflects an individual's active involvement in a particular activity. More recent developments in motivational research suggest that students weigh up the value and purpose of expending energy in the pursuit of a particular goal (Appleton et al. 2008). An attractive goal, supported by the belief that it is attainable, motivates people to act (Shunk, 1991). The more motivated the student the more likely they are to become engaged, and active engagement can reinforce motivation (Markwell, 2007). In the expectancy-value framework, the intrinsic value of a task results from a decision-making process in which the student takes into consideration the importance of doing well on a specific task, the personal interest of the content of the task, and its usefulness in relation to future personal goals, as well as the cost or the perceived negative aspects of engaging in this task (Eccles and Wigfield, 1995; Wigfield and Eccles, 1992). Academic achievement is a desirable outcome of motivation and engagement (A. J. Martin,

2007). As it is possible to be motivated but not actively engaged in a particular task, it seems that motivation is necessary but not necessarily sufficient for engagement (Appleton et al. 2008). Research suggests that levels of student motivation and self-efficacy are positively affected by well-being and confidence, learning by doing, success in a 'real' challenge, and the lecturers' motivation and enthusiasm (Bandura, 1997; Linnenbrink and Pintrich, 2002). Nilsen (2009) emphasises the positive influence of proximal goals rather than one big goal on motivation and performance.

#### **2.3.4.2 Self-efficacy/self-concept**

Self-efficacy and self-concept are frameworks through which competency beliefs are typically investigated (Nicholson et al. 2011). Self-efficacy, (the very foundation of human agency according to Bandura, 1997), personal goals, possible selves, individual interests, and a mastery goal orientation are all examples of "agency-based motivational constructs" (Reeve and Tseng, 2011). Self-efficacy is described by Bartimote-Aufflick et al. (2016:1918) "the single most important (and reliable) predictor of university student achievement in recent decades". Self-efficacy is a person's subjective appraisal of their ability to succeed in a particular task based on inferences drawn from prior performances (Moller et al. 2009). Because self-efficacy is based on future orientated cognitive appraisals, it is therefore malleable. Likewise, academic self-efficacy (see Bandura 1986, 1997) concerns future orientated, cognitive judgements of competence e.g. I believe that I can succeed in my forthcoming maths examination. Self-efficacy is a motivational component presupposed in the initiation of self-regulated learning (Metallidou and Vlachou, 2007), a key requirement in the state of student engagement. Self-concept relates closely to other self-constructs such as motivation, anxiety and especially self-efficacy. Self-concept incorporates cognitive, and to a certain degree affective appraisals, is past orientated and therefore stable.

Recognition of the beneficial personal outcomes associated with the enhancement of self-concept (having positive feelings about oneself) is evident in various contexts. These include education where academic self-concept, alongside self-reliance and academic achievement, are recognised as desirable outcomes (Moller et al. 2009). Academic self-concept is concerned with past-orientated judgements of competence related to esteem and self-worth e.g. I failed my last two maths examinations, I am no good at maths (Nicholson et al. 2011). Research suggests that academic self-concept has an important influence on how students

feel about themselves, their accomplishments, their educational decisions and their persistence and therefore has significant implications for educational policy and practice (Moller et al. 2009). Academic self-efficacy and academic self-concept are domain specific competence belief frameworks such that one can believe they are a competent mathematician but an incompetent linguist (Nicholson et al. 2011). Moller et al. (2009) allude to a growing consensus that measures of achievement and self-concept within a specific domain are significantly positively correlated. Higher competence beliefs predict improved achievement and learning outcomes including effort, task persistence, motivation and self-regulation (Nicholson et al. 2011).

Zimmerman (2008) explains the self-regulation of learning as the goals learners set themselves, the self-control they exercise over their behavior, actions, and beliefs, their persistent motivation, all aimed at achieving academic success. According to Fernández et al. (2013) the use of self-regulated learning strategies is determined by the student's level of interest in learning and achievement as well as their perceived self-efficacy in the use of these strategies. Fernández et al. (2013) also note that it is the optimization rather than simply the amount of time spent on academic tasks that is important.

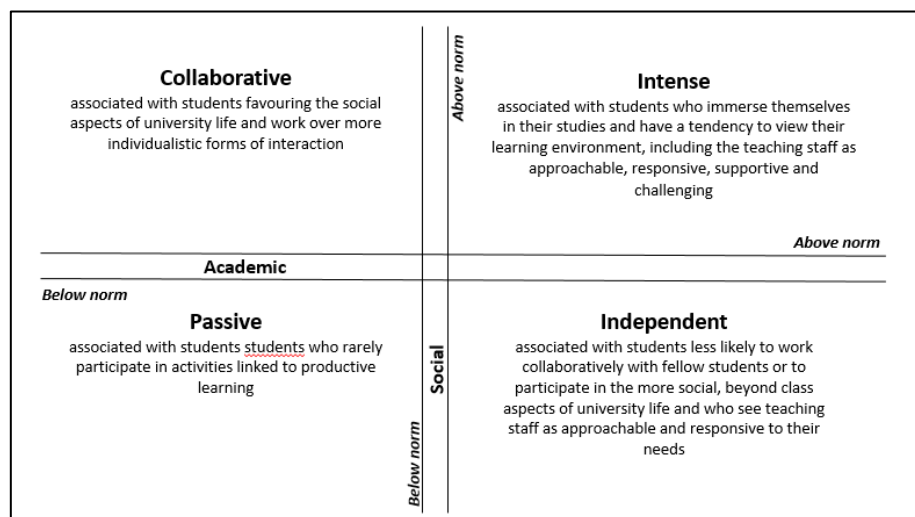
Tutors are encouraged to develop rather than diminish a student's self-efficacy through feedback (formative and summative) paying particular attention to first year UGs who need encouragement and constructive criticism (Gibbs and Simpson, 2005; Nilsen, 2009). Questions however remain about how a tutor can deal effectively with constantly changing student cohorts at different stages in the student experience, within and across programmes and units, with different learning styles, levels of self-efficacy and values etc., etc. Indeed the challenge for tutors is to determine which strategies are most appropriate when, as Perry (1985) suggests, different worlds in the classroom collide.

Academic self-efficacy, that is to say, the belief that one is competent and in control of one's learning, can bolster both academic engagement and performance (Suarez-Orozco et al. 2009). The degree to which a student is 'connected' to what is going on in their classes, referred to by Steinberg et al (1996) as 'academic engagement', encompasses the cognitive, behavioural and emotional dimensions proposed by Fredricks et al. (2004). The value of academic engagement as a predictor of academic performance is considered in Salamonson

et al's (2009) research which suggests that selected 'elements' of academic engagement ('homework completion', 'lecture attendance' and 'study hours') and academic disengagement ('part-time work') do affect levels of academic performance. "Individual student strategies, competencies, personality and lecture quality (perceived and/or actual)" (Moore et al. 2008:17) can also affect academic performance. However, Schlechty (2002 in Zyngier, 2008) suggests students that appear to be engaged maybe playing by the rules of the game and "maybe no more than passively compliant or even ritualistically engaged".

### 2.3.4.3 Student engagement styles

The transient nature of SE is reflected in Coates (2007) "Typological model of student engagement styles" (See Figure 1). The model identifies social and academic dimensions of engagement within the four styles of SE presented.



**Figure 1 Typological model of student engagement styles (Coates, 2007)**

Coates (2007) emphasises that the styles are "transient states rather than student traits or types" that do not each represent a set of "enduring qualities, [...] sustained within individuals over time or across contexts". A longitudinal assessment of the same students would according to Coates (2007) be required to investigate the stability of their engagement styles.

"The well-adjusted and engaged student" according to Krause (2007), "is one who assesses and re-assesses their thinking as transitions and opportunities to engage in different ways continue through and beyond the first year of university." Whether Krause's (2007)

generalisation is pertinent to an increasingly heterogeneous student body is questioned by Stefani (2007).

The 'Identity-Based Student Disengagement' Model (Lund Dean and Jolly, 2012) features alternative decision processes a student might follow when a learning activity is presented. The 'current self' or salient identity, determines the willingness of the student to engage with the learning activity presented. In the model, three student responses to a particular learning activity are proposed, the nature of each determined by the student's perception of the level of threat posed by the learning activity to their current self-identity. The responses include participate fully, participate guardedly or disengage.

### **2.3.5 Dimensions of student engagement summary**

There is little evidence within the literature reviewed in this section of the thesis, that tutors were the source of the data collected, a significant omission that this study will address.

#### **2.3.5.1 Behavioural dimension Summary**

Behavioural engagement is generally amenable to and subject to a variety of measures (Fredricks et al. 2011). Attendance is an undeniably significant form of behavioural engagement that receives more attention in the literature than any other form of behavioural engagement such as participation and independent study. Most definitions (See Table 1) and measures of SE feature attendance, which is often treated a synonymous with engagement. Many HEIs have introduced attendance policies, despite the questions around the moral and philosophical grounds for mandatory attendance in post-compulsory, paid education (MacFarlane, 2013). The availability of online resources may also have weakened the mandatory attendance argument. The link between attendance and attainment is inconclusive (Crede et al. 2010; Harris, 2008; Moore et al. 2008). Pascarelli and Terenzini (1991 in Pike and Kuh, 2005 ) assert that it is the quality of an individual's effort and their level of involvement in academic and non-academic activities that largely determines educational impact. This significance of attendance to tutors will be explored in this study.

There is a deliberative role for the tutor in encouraging independent study (Lau, 2017) and in-class participation (Pratton and Hales, 1986). However, participation and reticence are not always reliable indicators of individual engagement, or ultimately outcomes, particularly in a



culturally diverse classroom (Chanock, 2010; Wilkinson and Olliver-Gray, 2006). Engagement in extra-curricular activities has featured for some time in many SE definitions. Graduate employability concerns that have increased ostensibly in tandem with tuition fees have intensified HEI interest in the nature, utility, and popularity among intended audiences of extra-curricular activities. These are matters particularly relevant to the organisation under study and will be explored further in the Findings and Discussion Chapter 4.

#### **2.3.5.2 Emotional dimension Summary**

Although variously labelled, the emotional, affective or relational dimension is concerned with students' feelings, in particular feelings of belonging, feeling part of and therefore identifying with the university, their course and cohort. Belonging is critical to retention and success in HE (Thomas, 2012) and therefore of interest to the organisation under study. The student journey through HE involves the student in various transitions including the initial transition into HE and subsequent transitions between years of study. Transition Theory (Sargent and Schlossberg, 1988), applied in an HE context suggests an enhanced tutor awareness of the potential difficulties associated with the various transitions (or events) within the student journey can inform the support and advice the tutor can offer students on how to overcome such difficulties and to acquire the necessary competencies. Student expectations and understanding are key. Students will adapt more easily if the institution and its tutors are explicit in pre and post-enrolment communications about how the university works and the rationale for what is expected of them (van der Meer, 2012). This is particularly important for organisations such as the one under study that has high numbers of first generation students who are less likely to have the HE experience of others such as family members to draw on. The student identity developed during the student journey is important because it is concerned with the extent to which the student feels they fit in to their chosen HE Institution (Reay et al. 2010). The student identity also influences engagement, motivation and self-efficacy, which are all key determinants of learning (Wilson et al. 2015). The present study will explore the extent to which tutors at the organisation under study, understand, appreciate the significance of, and support the development of the student identity.

### **2.3.5.3 Cognitive dimension summary**

Cognitive engagement concerns a student's feelings about themselves, their work, their skills (Metallidou and Vlachou, 2007) and involves self-regulated and motivational learning processes (Ben-Eliyahu et al. 2018). There are strong links between learning and cognitive engagement (Harris, 2008), that Pickering (2017:822) describes as "the key domain in supporting effective learning". Self-efficacy, described by Bartimote-Aufflick et al. (2016:1918) as "the single most important (and reliable) predictor of university student achievement in recent decades", is also discussed within the cognitive engagement literature. This study will explore the extent to which cognitive engagement is understood, recognised, and if and how it is encouraged by tutors at the organisation under study.

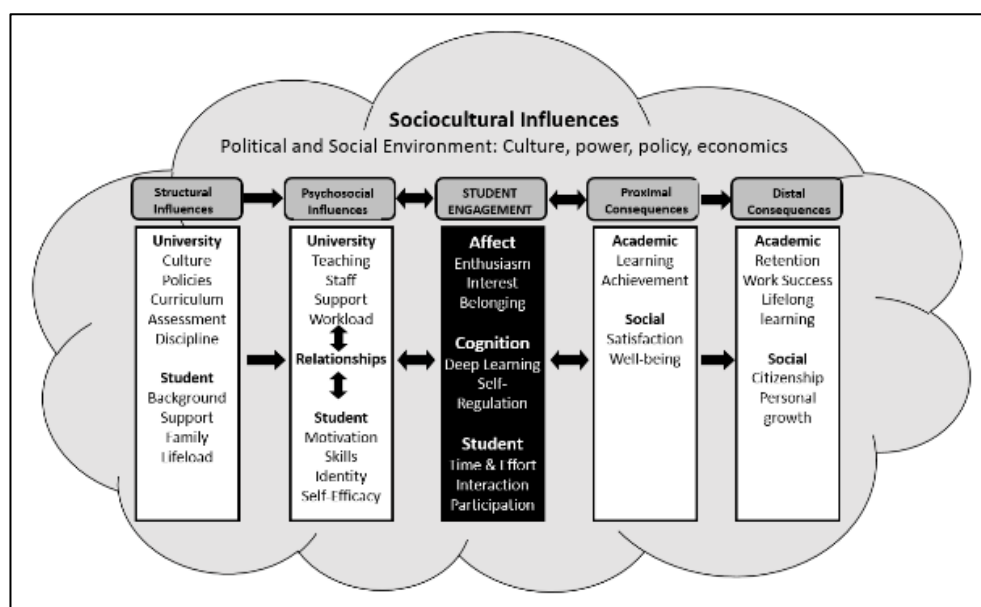
## **2.4 The need for a holistic understanding of student engagement**

From a practitioner perspective, the dimensions of SE discussed in the literature do not consider a sufficiently broad spectrum of SE drivers and barriers and there is little agreement on what constitutes a sound measure. Previous research is fragmented and does not convey the complexity and dynamic nature of SE or the level of interplay between the different dimensions. There are, for example, considerable overlaps between the different SE influences associated with each of the dimensions. Pickering (2017:822) notes that effective learning is difficult to visualise and that unless engagement is causative, it is a "poor proxy for learning". The temptation to amalgamate the easily observable behavioural and emotional patterns of engagement with actual learning is described by Mayer (2004:15) as 'the constructivist teaching fallacy'. According to (Mayer, 2004) instructional methods should also encourage cognitive engagement. Appearing to be physically interacting and enjoying the teaching session is not sufficient (Pickering, 2017).

The extent to which SE is experienced at the level of the individual is underrepresented in the literature. Daily conversations between students and tutors reveal individual (sometimes unique, often less so) circumstances with potentially catastrophic SE impacts that for many students remain undisclosed. This situation does not however obviate the need to capture these circumstances in a holistic and operationally authentic view of SE.

### 2.4.1 Conceptual framework of engagement, antecedents and consequences

The Kahu (2013) framework exposes the previously indiscernible distinction between the individual state of SE, its influences and its consequences. It offers a broader view of SE that extends the narrower view evident in the literature. The essence of SE according to Kahu (2013) is the student's emotional, behavioural, and cognitive connection to their study, which is influenced by a complex array of factors that are embedded within the wider socio-cultural context. Embedding SE in this wider socio-cultural context facilitates a broader definition of SE (Kahu, 2013). Kahu (2013) and others (see for example Coates, 2007; Krause, 2007) describe engagement as a unique, individual experience rather than an internal static state. SE is according to Kahu (2013) situational, stemming from the interplay between the individual and the context and influenced therefore by the characteristics of the student and the characteristics of the institution.



**Figure 2 Conceptual framework of engagement, antecedents and consequences**

The framework acknowledges the distinct yet overlapping, and in some instances bi-directional relationships between the framework elements (Kahu, 2013). Kahu's (2013) approach facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the important influences at play within the process of engagement and therefore the antecedents of the desired outcome that

is an engaged student. The distinction in the framework between the antecedents, the state, and the potential consequences of engagement addresses what Kahu (2013) sees as varying degrees of conflation of these elements in earlier research. By positioning SE as more than simply the student's lived reality, the framework elucidates the unique nature of the individual student experience within the sociocultural context, whose impact, according to Kahu (2013), is often neglected.

According to Kahu (2013) the conceptual framework integrates the four diverse perspectives identifiable in the SE literature that in isolation, tell a partial story (Kahu, 2013). Depicted in this framework for understanding and researching student engagement, are some but not necessarily all of the relationships between the disaggregated central variables of each perspective (Kahu, 2013). Although Maskell and Collins (2017) acknowledge the holistic perspective provided by bringing together the behavioural, psychological and sociocultural aspects of SE within the Kahu (2013) framework, they also criticise Kahu's limited explanation of how these various aspects interact with one another to form the holistic perspective. A more detailed explanation of these interactions would need to be informed by empirical testing of the framework which, to date, is not evident in the literature. The present study provides this detail. The Kahu (2013) framework elements provide a useful structure for the remaining sections of this literature review.

#### **2.4.2 The sociocultural element**

The sociocultural element is concerned with the short and longer-term impact of influences originating in the broader political and social contexts. There is a discernible and developing narrative in the HE literature concerning the impact of government and broader social attitudes to HE. According to McCullough (2009), it is the state's interest in HE as a driver of economic development that is driving university agendas. Reflecting on the social and economic purposes of HE, McArthur (2009) notes that a 'functionalist' view of the relationship between education and society is based on the assumption that in a functioning society, education is coordinated with work requirements. Whilst conceding that the social role of universities is often acknowledged in government statements and policies, in McArthur's (2009) view this is rarely explained or elaborated on in sufficient detail. Government measures that have exposed HEIs to competition from private providers and the removal of

the cap on university tuition fees validate Naidoo's (2003 in McArthur, 2009:740) description of HE as "an industry for enhancing national competitiveness and as a lucrative service that can be sold in the global marketplace". Whilst there is encouragement in government statements and policies for universities to satisfy the demands of business, the involvement of businesses in the running of universities is also being encouraged (McArthur, 2009). The marketisation of HE that has resulted from such moves has increased the levels of competition in the HE sector and encouraged the perception of the student as a customer. McCullough (2009) proposes the 'student as co-producer' to overcome what he perceives as the inadequacies of the 'student as consumer' metaphor that deemphasises the students role in learning and overemphasises what is in effect only one aspect of the student's role and the university's mission (McCullough, 2009). Sections 1.2.2 and 1.2.3 present an overview of government initiated measures that have shaped the current UKHE context and their direct and indirect impacts on HEIs in particular NWU, the local context for this research.

Successive governments have sought to widen participation in HE for reasons usefully articulated in the *National strategy for access and student success in higher education (BIS, 2014:7-8)* published under the 2010 to 2015 Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government.

*"Higher education benefits everyone. It helps individuals to unlock their potential, it is one of the best pathways to achieving a rewarding career and it contributes significantly to physical and mental wellbeing. It also benefits the wider economy – creating jobs, helping businesses prosper by providing them with highly qualified and skilled staff, and stimulating long-term economic growth, innovation, and competitiveness in the global economy. Higher education has also been shown to have a positive impact on social cohesion and the development of active, committed citizens: for example, graduates are likely to be more engaged with their communities."*

According to HEFCE 2016 data, the proportions of students from different backgrounds differs between types of HEIs. In 2014-15, 14% of students at both low- and medium-tariff HEIs and less than 7% at high-tariff HEIs, were from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. In the same year students from the least disadvantaged backgrounds accounted for 42% of entrants to high-tariff universities, 21% to low- and 24% to medium-tariff institutions. In 2016, 18 year olds from the least advantaged areas of England were 73% more likely than in 2006 to enter higher education and 51% more likely than in 2011 to enter a highly selective university. However,

the HEFCE 2016 Data also indicates that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to discontinue their studies after the first year, a situation that has potential implications for the performance data of HEIs involved in widening participation initiatives. It is an oversimplification to suggest that discontinuation of studies is simply an HEI performance issue. Tutor experience indicates that although it can be an appropriate way to bring the curtain down, it is often the final act in a year-long tragedy for all those involved; students, their tutors and their families. Either way it is a costly exercise.

Though pre-dating recent increases in tuition fees, research by Cooke et al. (2004) amongst graduates from different social class backgrounds reveals a number of arguably sobering findings for those seeking more mutually meaningful engagement with students in academic settings. When compared to students from advantaged backgrounds, students from disadvantaged backgrounds are

- more likely, particularly in the final year of study to be in paid employment during term time and therefore less likely to engage in more social, non-academic university activities
- more likely to have financial concerns that increase throughout their course of study with many of them expecting to leave university with financial debts.

Cooke et al's (2004) study suggested that in each year of study, the social life of advantaged students was consistently active involving engagement in non-academic activities whilst the social life of disadvantaged students deteriorated over the course of study. Cooke et al. (2004) speculate that increasing financial pressures as the course progresses might be a contributing factor to this deterioration.

According to Finnie (2004) student's decision to go to university is contingent upon them perceiving the benefits accrued outweighing the total cost (the investment decision rule) and being satisfied that they can cover the living and out of pocket expenses (the liquidity constraints decision rule). The availability of grants and loans is another consideration in the decision. Grants in particular provide greater liquidity during studies and because they are non-returnable, reduce the student's personal contribution to the HE investment (Maringe et al. 2009). In a similar vein, Callendar (2003) refers to 'debt-tolerance', which is apparently lower amongst students from disadvantaged backgrounds making them less likely to attend university. Increasing tuition fees and the replacement of the student maintenance grants

with loans for new full-time students in England starting their courses from August 2016 will have a bearing on the decisions to be made and potentially decisions already made prior to the announcement of these changes. A further factor in the decision-making is the students (and potentially their family's) attitude to debt. Debt aversion in the HE context is explained by Maringe et al. (2009:148) as "a situation where individuals are unwilling to take loans to finance their HE study even though they know it represents a good investment" and categorised as:

- 'Risk-based' debt aversion relates to the perceived value of the course of study, concerns over the long-term debt incurred and uncertainty around the returns on the HE investment made in terms of employment prospects after graduation.
- 'Value debt' aversion is driven by religious or cultural issues with borrowing and is circumvented by grants.
- 'Sticker price debt aversion' is where the individual is concerned about the total debt accumulated over the life of the programme of study

A study by Vigurs et al. (2016) noted greater anxiety amongst WP students and those with degrees perceived to be less in demand, about the high levels of fees and debt they must accrue in order to participate in higher education. Many students were found to be unnecessarily constrained in the graduate choices they made, due to 'best guessing', often inaccurately, the potential impact of the debt repayment on their futures. The potential ramifications of these findings for WP students, and HEIs such as the one under study are considerable. In addition to reconsidering whether to participate in HE, student decisions about graduate futures may be less well-informed due to an unrealistically narrow view of the available opportunities (Vigurs et al. 2016).

Kandiko and Mawer (2013) allude to a 'consumerist ethos' amongst student regarding the value of the educational experience and the value of the expected return on their substantial investment. Students appear to employ contact time as the key measure of value for money, assuming this is all their fees pay for (Kandiko and Mawer, 2013)

Part-time employment is often required to finance living expenses, particularly but not exclusively for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Student often face competing demands such as the requirement to attend timetabled teaching sessions or to undertake independent study at the same time as undertaking essential paid work to finance their living

expenses. Despite tutor concerns about the potential distractions of student part-time work commitments, NSSE (2008) findings suggest a positive effect on several dimensions of full time undergraduate student engagement (Kuh, 2010). Whilst a level of balance between the numbers of hours paid work and the hours of study a student is 'engaged' in, equating paid work with disengagement underestimates the potential value of the work experience and the ways in which it might be capitalized upon (Yorke, 2011). According to Kuh (2010), the skills sought by employers such as team-working and time management are often developed in part-time work. Part-time work can also provide real-life experiences that students can reflect on in deeper and more enriching levels of learning and to which they can apply in-class learning. Kuh (2010) advocates making work relevant to learning through the design and development of modules that integrate classroom and work-based learning.

The extent to which students 'engage' in their education is according to Kahu (2013) determined by the interplay between the socio-cultural influences and the university and student specific influences within the structural and psychosocial elements of the framework. These are the focus of the following sections of this literature review.

### **2.4.3 The structural element**

Within the structural element of the Kahu (2013) framework, the influences listed are categorised as either university or student, by way of identifying their origin or source.

According to (Mann, 2001) a student's level of connection within higher education is influenced by a number of contextual factors, presented in the Kahu (2013) framework as structural influences that originate from within the university. The policies and practices of the institution for example permeate all aspects of the student's HE experience, influencing and shaping the institution-student relationship and the nature and levels of the student's engagement (Wilms 2003 in Zyngier, 2008).

The student structural influences in the Kahu (2013) framework include many of the concerns of the emotional dimension of SE literature discussed in section 2.3.3, for example, the extent to which a student feels they belong at the university and identify as a student of the university. Discussed within the student structural influences section 2.4.3.2 however are matters considered by Kahu (2013) to make up the students 'lifeload'. Lifeload is interpreted



here as the concerns, responsibilities, and commitments, arising from the student's past and current personal and interpersonal circumstances.

#### **2.4.3.1 University structural influences**

The perception that SE is a measure of institutional quality (Kuh 2001 in Harper and Quaye, 2009) implies that the responsibility for ensuring an increasingly diverse student body engages in educationally purposeful activities lies with the HEI executive, academic and administrative staff (Harper and Quaye, 2009). Institutional approaches to student engagement are often fragmentary and sometimes contradictory (Baron and Corbin, 2012) and HEIs that expect students to engage themselves could be considered weak institutions (Harper and Quaye, 2009). According to Baron and Corbin (2012) student engagement must be pursued holistically in a 'whole-of-university' approach rather than at the level of the individual teacher, school or faculty and with a common understanding of what it is the institution seeks to achieve.

Over the last two decades universities in selected US states have been enrolling a reported 60% of eligible yet academically unprepared first year college students on expensive and non-credit bearing remedial maths and English courses in an effort to address the significantly lower graduation rates this unpreparedness can lead to (Shulock, 2010). Shulock (2010) notes "a dichotomy between substantive college readiness standards and acceptable high school graduation rates", an arguably similar dichotomy that exists in the UKHE context. The introduction of explicit links between the high-school curriculum and college-readiness standards are recommended as a way of influencing high-school classroom instruction where one of the main roots of the problem is believed to lie (Shulock, 2010). Wilson-Strydom (2016) recommends that universities and schools establish long-term, meaningful partnerships in order to ensure that awareness of the range of capabilities underpinning readiness and what it means to study at university informs the decision-making about courses of study much earlier than at the point of application or registration.

According to Marsh (2014) retention (or persistence), an indicator of student engagement (Davis et al. 2012), is affected by institutional characteristics such as the structure and workings of the institution. Therefore, the experience that universities 'sell' students must be deliverable (Kandiko and Mawer, 2013), so that the unmet expectations and inappropriate

choice of course, both key reasons for withdrawal (Baxter and Hatt, 2000), can be avoided. Institutional and course information published in brochures, on university websites and provided at open and visit days must provide prospective students with a realistic view of the content and associated costs of course they are signing up for. In the UK, rules governing the relationship between HE providers and prospective and current undergraduate students are addressed in consumer protection law. Non-compliance with consumer protection law can result in enforcement action by the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA).

Institutional factors such as the social environment that is provided or promoted, the accessibility of administrative staff and procedures, the potential for cultural alienation and the hidden costs of university level education might mitigate against engagement for some students (Stefani, 2008). Whilst institutions have tended to focus on teaching and support as targets for improving student engagement, an alternative approach could be to increase student awareness of the range of variables within their own control that can impact both positively and negatively on their engagement and success at university (Kahu, 2013). Universities need to offer the extra-curricular activities, short and longer term internships and work placements that students see as opportunities beyond their degree to gain valuable employability related skills and experience (Kandiko and Mawer, 2013).

The university structural influences discussed below include class size, curriculum and discipline, assessment and assessment feedback.

#### 2.4.3.1.1 Class size

Although there is a longstanding view that 'students perform worse in large classes' (Dearing, 1997), class size is ultimately a key variable in the "production" of learning or knowledge that is easily manipulated by policy makers (Ehrenberg et al. 2001). Large classes are associated with the massification trend in higher education and allow universities to accommodate greater numbers of students with fewer resources (Hornsby and Osman, 2014). A deleterious outcome associated with large-sized classes is the increased faculty reliance on the lecture method of instruction (Cuseo, 2007). Although streaming appears to be effective in reducing large classes into smaller groups, this may not always be possible or efficient, as it requires additional teaching resources, which are not always available (Exeter et al. 2010). Diminishing government support in the HE sector provides a justification albeit primarily on economic

grounds for larger class sizes (Maringe and Sing, 2014). According to Cuseo (2007:5), “current budgetary constraints are creating a climate of cost containment, within which larger class sizes may be seen as an alluringly quick and convenient cost-cutting strategy”.

Whilst The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE Guideline, 2004) and the National Education Association (NEA, 2003) endorse a class size of 15 as optimal at the pre-university level, a review of the class size literature does not reveal a consensus on the optimum class size in HE. There is evidence of pressure in many countries to maintain small class sizes or reduce primary and secondary school level class sizes but large classes of up to 500 students are not uncommon at undergraduate level in HEIs, a situation that is unlikely to change in the context of rising student numbers (Mulryan-Kyne, 2010). According to Maringe and Sing (2014) the overall effect of increasing class sizes in tertiary education is not well understood. Cuseo (2007) notes that most HE class size studies compare classes of 50+ (higher range) with 25- (lower range) to demonstrate more positive average outcomes for smaller than larger classes. There is no consistent view as to why improved academic performance is evident in classes with less than 20 pupils, however the change in teaching strategies, and the more individualised and ‘higher quality’ instruction this facilitates are suggested reasons (Finn et al. 2003). According to Cuseo (2007) a manageable class size of 15 is unlikely to change the teachers course objectives or expectations and might facilitate more individualized, detailed and diagnostic feedback to students however more might be expected of students inside the classroom (e.g., more participation) and outside the classroom (e.g., more writing).

Ehrenberg et al. (2001) advise institutional caution when evaluating the benefits and costs of class-size reduction initiatives and alternative policies designed to accomplish the same student learning related goals. According to Ehrenberg et al. (2001), class-size reduction initiatives presuppose the availability of teachers who are equivalent in quality to existing teachers to staff the extra classes and the existence of vacant classrooms into which the new classes created by the reductions could be placed. In an HE focused comparative study of class size and new teacher effects, Sapelli and Illanes (2016) found that both led to a drop in student satisfaction. According to Sapelli and Illanes (2016), up to a certain level, the negative effects of increasing class size are less than that of introducing a first time teacher. First time teachers were shown to perform significantly worse than their peers. Beyond a certain level,

the Sapelli and Illanes (2016) findings suggest it is better to split the class and appoint a first time teacher.

Large class size is an issue of the complexities and challenges associated with delivering both equality and quality learning opportunities for all students and not simply an issue of numbers (Maringe and Sing, 2014). There is evidence that suggests diminishing returns in terms of opportunities to learn as class sizes increase (Cuseo, 2004). A positive association between small class size and the development of higher-level thinking skills is evident in a number of studies. Using Blooms taxonomy as a framework of analysis, Fischer and Grant (1983) found that the larger the class, the greater the chances that students engaged in their discourses at the lower levels of abstraction. In small classes with fewer than 15 students, abstraction was more at the analysis level. In larger classes between 16 and 45, most students abstracted at the comprehension level. Students in classes larger than 46 tended to abstract at the factual recall level (see also Dunkin and Barnes 1985 and McKeachie 1980 in Maringe and Sing, 2014). Bandiera et al. (2010) present evidence that larger classes reduce students' academic achievement as measured by end of year final examination performance.

Large class size is "a contextual variable that has generally adverse effects on student learning, mediated primarily by lowering students' level of engagement (active involvement) with the course instructor, with classmates, and with the subject matter" (Cuseo, 2007:15). As class size increases, individual accountability and the amount and intensity of student-tutor interactions and exchanges generally reduce, which can result in anonymity and passivity among students (Mulryan-Kyne, 2010). According to Gibbs (1992) it is difficult in large-group teaching for teachers to elicit student answers and to know if students understand course content. Student-faculty interaction is strongly associated with a number of positive student outcomes, including retention, academic achievement, critical thinking, and educational aspiration (Astin, 1993; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993 in Cuseo, 2007). In large classes there is often a palpable distance between the students and the teacher who more often than not does not know the students personally and vice versa. Biggs (2011) suggests that informal exchanges between students and lecturers virtually disappear in large classes. Kuh et al (1991 in Mulryan-Kyne, 2010) refer to a 'compact of disengagement' that has a tendency to arise between tutors and students in large classes where according to their

observations the message tutors convey to their students is 'you leave me alone and I will leave you alone' (p362).

Bandiera et al. (2010) suggest that students may enrol into larger classes for subjects they are intrinsically less motivated to study and smaller classes for subjects they are intrinsically more motivated to study, potentially biasing any estimated class size effect. A comparison of core and elective unit performance indicates that the negative effect of class size is more pronounced when students have less choice (Bandiera et al. 2010).

The anonymity and impersonal nature of large groups can illicit behaviour unlikely to be exhibited in small classes including arriving late for class and/or leaving early, off-task behaviour resulting in noise and distraction during teaching sessions (Carbone, 1999). High absenteeism may go unnoticed or tolerated. Anecdotal evidence suggests that attendance at large lectures falls off throughout the term, often down to between 30 and 40% by the end (McKeachie 1999 in Isbell and Cote, 2009). Low participation levels, social isolation, lack of adequate resources (Gibbs, 1992), inadequacy of classroom facilities and environment, lack of structure in lectures, and lack of opportunity for discussion (Carbone and Greenberg 1998 in Broughan and Grantham, 2012) are other reasons cited for a general dissatisfaction among students in the context of large classes.

Large classes can be problematic for the student transition for the first time into HE. Students may not get to know each other and this is particularly important for first year students who are noted by Ward and Jenkins (1992) for their unpreparedness to deal with the large-class sizes that confront them. Mulryan-Kyne (2010) reported students being uncomfortable and confused, spending their first weeks in a 'state of shock' (p27) and feeling anonymous in their large classes. Consequently, passive in-class roles are often adopted with students feeling disinclined to ask questions or to contribute (Mulryan-Kyne, 2010). The practice evident in some institutions of "herding" first year students into huge, introductory general-education classes, encourages passive spectating that can lead to the development of unproductive mental habits or predispositions to learning that persist beyond the first year (Cuseo, 2007).

Large volumes of marking and student feedback are amongst the problems experienced by tutors teaching large classes (Ward and Jenkins, 1992). Assigning 'extra reading' for example

can also become futile if there are too few copies of textbooks available to large numbers of students (Mulryan-Kyne, 2010).

#### 2.4.3.1.2 Curriculum

The curriculum is one of the most important products HEIs offer their customers (Barnett et al. 2001) and yet there are variations in conceptualisations of the term 'curriculum' (Fraser and Bosanquet, 2006). According to Fraser and Bosanquet (2006:282) academics associate many different meanings with curriculum and will, largely, use the term in different contexts without realising its problematic nature. Furthermore, the meaning(s) attributed to curriculum are embedded in an epistemological framework that the individual using the term may or may not be aware of (Fraser and Bosanquet, 2006). This is important because a prerequisite for any kind of informed and planned curriculum change is a shared language and understanding within the academic community of the curriculum elements and their interdependencies (Fraser and Bosanquet, 2006).

Curricula should according to Barnett (2009):

- be sufficiently demanding, such that 'resilience' may form;
- offer contrasting insights and perspectives, such that 'openness' may develop;
- require a continual presence and commitment (even through course regulations) on the part of the student, such that 'self-discipline' may come about;
- contain sufficient space and spaces, such that 'authenticity' and 'integrity' are likely to unfold.

However, HE must also equip students to continue their learning after graduation and to contribute in areas not covered in the curriculum (Boud, 1990).

#### 2.4.3.1.3 Academic discipline

According to Quinn (2012:73) "disciplines constitute the primary source for academic identities". The generation of discipline knowledge is main purpose of many academics (Quinn, 2012). Approaches to learning (Nelson Laird et al. 2008 in Kahu, 2013) and 'cultures of engagement' (Brint et al.2008:383) differ by discipline (Kahu, 2013). Early enculturation into the disciplinary discourse is essential (Stefani, 2008). It is the role of the academic tutor is to enable students to grasp the nature of the discourse rather than to assume that they do. Mature students with extensive work-related experience might for example discover that the

gap between espoused theory and reality is significant. Students may find academic expectations and, depending on their cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, the language used within the discipline difficult to grasp (Laurillard 2001). Whilst there is broad agreement about content and methods in the natural sciences and engineering, the so called 'hard' disciplines, in the 'soft' disciplines, such as humanities there is less consensus of knowledge (Brint et al. 2008).

Barnett (2009) suggests that different fields of study across disciplines and vocational areas call for and engender particular sets and weights of dispositions and qualities. Whilst dispositions are the ways a person engages with the world around them, qualities provide character to a person's manifestations of dispositions in the world. Dispositions include for example a will to learn, a will to engage, a preparedness to listen, a preparedness to explore and to hold oneself out to new experiences, a determination to keep going forward. Qualities describe the characteristics developed through one's efforts to come to know the world, for example courage, resilience, integrity, self-discipline, self-restraint, and respect for others. A student that has a will to learn might exemplify this will carefully, with respect for others encountered on the way, and with resilience when things get tough, or in a cavalier way, impervious to others who may even be trying to help (Barnett, 2009).

Barnett (2009) notes that disciplines have 'standards' written into them that appertain to the practices and their realisation, that mark out the disciplinary field. Engagement with the discipline requires the formation of dispositions and qualities that are characteristic of the disciplinary field. Unless universal dispositions such as a will to learn, a will to engage, and a preparedness to listen come to be formed in the student, they cannot make sustained and significant progress. Qualities are more singular in character so the extent to which each of these qualities is present will vary across the disciplines.

#### 2.4.3.1.4 Assessment

Assessment is the "engine that drives learning" (Race, 2006). It is 'the most powerful lever teachers have to influence the way students respond to a course and behave as learners' (Gibbs, 1999:41) and more influential to learning behaviour and learners' experience than teaching (Blokhman, 2007). Gibbs and Simpson (2005) suggest that the framework an assignment provides for its by-products, i.e. the associated learning activities such as 'reading

around' and 'constructing arguments', is arguably more important to the learning than the mark awarded. However, assessment outcomes concern all HE stakeholders. They provide a range of learning related measures concerning the individual student, the wider student cohort, individual units, the overall course of study, and the quality of teaching at the institution.

A common aim of undergraduate programmes of study is to develop independent learners. According to Boud (1990), assessment tasks often encourage the narrow and instrumental approach to learning frequently observed in the reproduction of what the tutor has presented. The desired critical thinking, deep understanding and independent activity, is unlikely to be achieved if students "learn to look always to their tutors to identify the objectives of their study, appropriate tasks to tackle and criteria for judgement" Boud (1990:104).

Snyder 1971 in Gibbs and Simpson (2005) allude to a 'hidden curriculum', an alternative curriculum to the one written in handbooks, that students have to discover and pay attention to in order to succeed, filtering out essentially what is and is not included in the assessment. Miller and Partlett (1974) categorise student orientations to cues about assessment content as 'cue-seekers' who proactively seek guidance about what is to be assessed and what specifically the marking tutor is looking for; 'cue-conscious' who listen and pay close attention to tutor guidance; 'cue-deaf' who are seemingly oblivious to any guidance provided. Students can be strategic in their use of time and 'selectively negligent' in avoiding content they believe is unlikely to be assessed (Gibbs and Simpson, 2005:6). Focusing predominantly on assessed topics is problematic if, as Gibbs and Simpson (2005) suggest, the way to improve and maintain quality and standards in higher education is through better student learning rather than better measurement of limited learning. As Boud (1990:107) notes, the fact that the tutor knows what they are trying to elicit in the assessments they set makes it difficult for them to accept that students might be operating on a completely different set of assumptions that could ultimately undermine the tutor's goals.

It has been suggested that any assessment strategy should be derived from a coherent institutional feedback policy that is owned and shared by lecturers and their students (Rae and Cochrane, 2008). Boud (1990) argues for the imposition of checks and balances to ensure



that the focus of assessment is on argument and the use of evidence rather than conformity to the view of lecturers or tutors. Students must be encouraged to develop the skills of learning how to learn, how to monitor their own work, how to establish their own criteria and how to make judgements about the worth of their achievements, all necessary elements of professional practice (Boud, 1990). Of particular relevance is the exposure of students on a management skills course, to identity-challenging and values-challenging course materials (Lund Dean and Jolly, 2012). The students are presented with three distinct types of knowledge they will encounter; cognitive (what they know); skills-based (what they know how to do); being (who they are and what is important to them). The level of 'being' knowledge acquired on the course is identified as "directly related to the extent to which students are willing to engage in reflection and potentially identity-threatening feedback about themselves" (Lund Dean and Jolly, 2012:238). Related assessments and grade weightings are therefore designed to make the risk of engagement more attractive to the students (Lund Dean and Jolly, 2012).

Assessment that is more frequent encourages students to study and practice more consistently, increasing the likelihood that they will distribute their study time more evenly throughout the term (Cuseo, 2007; Gibbs and Simpson, 2005). Although the trick is to design assessment regimes that generate engagement with learning tasks without increasing marking, as Gibbs and Simpson (2005) point out, assessment economies of scale are difficult to achieve in a climate of increasing class sizes. Also of concern is the suggestion that "assessors typically do not have any substantial grounding in the theory (limited as it is) and practice of assessment" (Yorke, 2001:11).

Assessment per se must take into account the needs of a broad church of knowledge backgrounds, study skills, conceptions of learning and knowledge within the cohort, clearly stating what is required and avoiding opportunities for misinterpretation (Gibbs and Simpson, 2005). Peer assessed formative assessments for example, have been shown to improve examination performance, a positive outcome of SE (Forbes and Spence 1991 in Gibbs and Simpson, 2005).

Faced with a choice of assessment methods, the tutor has to decide which are most appropriate at the unit level in terms of use, ease of use, validity and reliability and, at the

programme level, their contribution to the range of assessment methods the student experiences (G. Brown, 2001). Extended writing, for example, promotes student thinking and depth of information processing (Maringe and Sing, 2014), however, Exeter et al. (2010) found that students had to wait longer to receive feedback on essays and considered the assessment more subjective. This situation led to students questioning their grades after discussions with their peers (Exeter et al. 2010). The absence of extended writing in large class limits the extent to which thinking and depth of information processing is promoted (Maringe and Sing, 2014). Examination scores are a good measure of student performance and learning because (unlike in many North American universities, (Hoffman and Oreopoulos 2006 in Bandiera et al. 2010) they are a measure of the students' absolute performance, and because faculty have neither the incentive nor the possibility to manipulate test scores strategically to boost student numbers or to raise their own student evaluations.

Whilst coursework compares favourably with examinations in terms of acquired and retained learning (Gibbs and Simpson, 2005), in a variety of academic disciplines and professional programs, students report lower levels of test anxiety when exams are less frequent and carry proportionally less weight in terms of the overall course grade (Heins et al. 1984). Multiple Choice Question (MCQ) test critics contend that this form of assessment promotes surface learning, tests trivia and fails to examine higher cognitive process and understanding of concepts (Exeter et al. 2010). Students who are tested through multiple-choice items tend to exhibit surface learning strategies whereas those tested using extended essays engage more deeply with learning (Bean 2001). In a study of more than 200 Australian second-year undergraduates Scouller (1998) found that examination format (multiple choice vs. essay) had a significant influence on student's assessment preparation. Students were more likely to employ surface [memorization] strategies and report surface motives when preparing for multiple-choice question examinations and significantly more likely to employ deep [comprehension] strategies and report deep motives when preparing assignment essays (Op cit).

Tutors also need to challenge the authenticity of their assessments, particularly those that might have been set for many years, in terms of the consistency of the problems or scenarios featured with those the student might encounter in the domain in question in the world of practice (Boud, 1990). Work-engaged learning for example has a significant role in the

development of capabilities and attributes desired by employers and society more generally (Yorke, 2011). Whilst supporting the incorporation of work-engaged learning in curricula Yorke (2011) acknowledges the potential implications this has for assessment and assurance of quality and standards. The determination of the final award classification would need to take into account the contributions to the award of both academic and work-engaged learning (Yorke, 2011).

#### 2.4.3.1.5 Feedback

“Feedback is the oil that lubricates the cogs of understanding” (Race, 2006). Amongst the plethora of possible feedback qualities and attributes are that it should be timely, intimate and individual, empowering, encouraging (opening rather than closing doors), and manageable for the tutor providing it and the student receiving it (Race, 2004). However “Teachers’ feedback is often (though not always) generated from a more sophisticated epistemological stance than that of the student and this offers plenty of scope for misunderstanding of feedback or blank incomprehension” (Gibbs and Simpson, 2005:22). Students should be taught how to interpret and use feedback. It should therefore be understandable, taking into account the students’ level of sophistication, and focus on learning rather than marks, relating it specifically to future tasks and assessments (Gibbs and Simpson 2004 in Glover and Brown, 2006). Lecturers’ investment is required to develop the students’ skills in the application of feedback (Orsmond et al. 2005). According to Sadler et al. (1983:60) feedback needs to focus on ‘growth rather than grading’ encouraging and advancing student learning. These authors also suggest that lecturers frequently and mistakenly regard assessment as supplying a grade and/or brief comments and expect improvements as a result. In an educational setting, positive feedback is of critical importance to student learning and retention because it acknowledges the strengths a student has demonstrated and indicates how these can be developed further (Yorke, 2001). According to Glover and Brown (2006), whilst students see the mark as an important measure of achievement, they look for formative comments to aid their understanding. The Open University found that the feedback on a first year student’s first piece(s) of assessed work was a key influence on their motivation, particularly for those students looking for encouragement. To be useful, feedback needs to be regular, specific, focused on small chunks of the syllabus, formative as well as summative, and not simply corrections of errors (Gibbs

and Simpson, 2005). The tardy feedback that is arguably characteristic of summative end-of-unit assessments on modularised programmes of study is less likely to advance student learning (Yorke, 2001). “One piece of detailed feedback on an extended essay or design task after ten weeks of study is unlikely to support learning across a whole course very well” (Gibbs and Simpson, 2005:17). Feedback needs to tell students **where** and **not that** they have gone wrong, and what they can do about it – focusing on content rather than personal characteristics and encouraging learning rather than measuring failure (Gibbs and Simpson, 2005). According to Yorke (2001), formative assessment is a crucial component of student learning which done well can encourage a student to flourish and when done badly can discourage or lead to failure. Mutch (2003:37) however cautions, “receiving feedback and discussing it face-to-face can be a challenging process which, without careful management, can turn into confrontation”.

Reflections of those involved in the Glover and Brown (2006) research, undertaken as part of the 2003-2006 ‘Formative Assessment in Science Teaching’ (FAST) project suggest teachers need to consider:

- How much of the feedback given really matters
- Whether they need to provide all of the feedback all of the time
- Whether the important things be lost if they provide too much feedback
- Whether students will act on any of the feedback provided and whether we really expect them to.

Gibbs and Simpson (2005) highlight the potentially damaging and demotivating effects of grades without feedback and critical personal feedback that can negatively affect a student’s self-efficacy. Content-related feedback offers the student options for action and is less about them, their ego, and more about their action. There is compelling evidence that effort and persistence with tasks are strongly related to Self-efficacy (Schunk, 1984; 1985). Self-efficacy predicts academic achievement and is associated with the adoption of deep learning approaches (Thomas et al. 1987). Focusing on ‘at risk’ students, Wootton (2002) highlights the negative impact of assessment, and questions whether the system exists ‘to encourage learning or to measure failure’.

#### **2.4.3.2 Student structural Influences**

The background, support and family issues students potentially face are discussed in section 2.3.3 and included in Kahu's (2013) student structural influences. A student's engagement might also be influenced by their 'lifeload', that is to say, "the sum of all the pressures in their life", including university," the needs of dependants, finances and health" Kahu (2013:10). Whilst all of these pressures may be ever-present, their potentially significant influence on student engagement may only be exerted at times of crisis (Kahu, 2013). Common within the literature, is the view that these influences are largely outside the control of the student.

##### **2.4.3.2.1 Lifeload**

The introduction of tuition fees has fuelled student demands for 'value-for-money' education. Students want to know where their tuition fees are spent and how this has added to the quality and value of their degree (Kandiko and Mawer, 2013). Students now see themselves as consumers in a Higher Education market and so a key aspect of their assessment and evaluation of their course of study is 'satisfaction' (Maringe and Sing, 2014). Improved career prospects and career enhancements are amongst the key reasons for entering HE therefore students expect their chosen HEI to offer them relevant and related advice and guidance (Kandiko and Mawer, 2013). This includes guidance on extra-curricular activities and short and longer-term internships and work placements that are also viewed by students as opportunities beyond their degree to gain valuable employability related skills and experience (Kandiko and Mawer, 2013).

Inappropriate choice of course and unrealistic expectations about the nature of teaching and learning and are key reasons for withdrawal (Baxter and Hatt, 2000; Charlton et al. 2006; Christie et al. 2004). Limited social support networks and lack of 'fit' between student and institution are also factors in the student withdrawal decision Christie et al. (2004).

Student perceptions of how well the institution values them and how well it responds to their needs is at the root of considerable student withdrawal according to Walsh et al. (2009). Unmet expectations which, "broadly defined, may be an inevitable accompaniment to the experience of entering an unfamiliar organizational setting" (Louis, 1980:228) maybe another reason for withdrawal. Assimilation or adaptation processes can help ameliorate and bridge any differences between the perceptions of the students and the institution resulting in

positive outcomes for the student (Walsh et al. 2009). Markwell (2007) highlights the importance of creating a sense of cohort amongst a diverse student body who feel that they are together on the same learning journey. Alienation and disengagement particularly amongst non-traditional students are recognised areas of concern for HEIs. Analyses suggests that whilst withdrawal/non-completion rates are higher amongst students with lower entrance qualifications, the impact of social class difference is the same regardless of entry requirements, and withdrawal prior to the end of the first year is more likely amongst students from poorer backgrounds (Christie et al. 2004).

According to Harper and Quaye (2009), students are more likely to persist through to graduation if they are actively engaged in educationally purposeful activities inside and outside the classroom. Walsh et al. (2009) suggests that a student who reaches the final year of their studies is acclimatised to the pressures of higher education and the challenges of progression that students who leave early have not experienced. HEIs, through the deployment and organisation of their support services, resources, curriculum and other learning opportunities, have the ability to induce students into participating in activities that lead to experiences and desired outcomes such as persistence, satisfaction, learning, and graduation (Kuh et al 2007 in Harper and Quaye, 2009).

Whilst withdrawal is seen by some students as the answer to their problems (Cook, 2012), it has potential implications for the institution concerned in terms of lost income, the costs associated with recruiting replacement students and the reputational impact when 'non-completion' figures are published. Data from National Student Surveys introduced since the turn of the last century in North America, Canada, Australasia and the UK since the turn of the last century indicate that satisfaction and achievement levels are higher, and dropout rates lower amongst 'engaged' students. This suggests that an institutional understanding of SE could be beneficial, informing the design and development of pedagogical approaches and learning environments that respond to student needs (Kuh, 2009b; Coates 2010) potentially increasing the effectiveness of the institution in terms of student learning and development (Pascarella et al. 2010). However, according to Krause and Coates (2008), whilst institutions are responsible for creating environments that make learning possible and that afford opportunities to learn, students are ultimately responsible for their own learning.

Student mental health and wellbeing is an area of growing concern in UK HE. According to Thorley (2017) the number of students disclosing a mental health condition to their UK university has increased significantly over the past ten years. UK universities strategic responses has been less than optimal with only 29% introducing a mental health and wellbeing strategy and 43% with course content designed and delivered in ways that will improve student mental health and wellbeing (Thorley, 2017). There is an increased risk that students will withdraw from university and in the most severe cases the risk of suicide where support for poor mental health and wellbeing is not provided. There was a record number of student suicides in 2015 and a record number of withdrawals among students with mental health problems (Thorley, 2017).

Irrespective of demography, the vast majority of students seeking support for non-academic issues consulted either friends on their course or family members (Walsh et al. 2009). These findings are by no means consistent across the sector adding weight to the Walsh et al. (2009) suggestion that the utilisation of services may be culturally and institutionally specific. (Walsh et al. 2009). Although there is usually a positive effect on the retention and ultimate achievement of students who access the university's services, ultimately the control the institution has over student decisions to withdraw is limited (Walsh et al. 2009).

#### **2.4.4 The psychosocial element**

The more immediate university and student influences and the complex interplay between them are encapsulated in the psychosocial element of the Kahu (2013) framework. In the absence of an explicit description of the university psychosocial influences listed, they are interpreted in this study as the teaching delivered by tutors at the institution, the support and continuing professional development the tutors (staff) receive, and the workload the tutors are allocated. The student psychosocial influences listed in the framework are the focus of the emotional and cognitive dimensions of SE literature discussed in sections 2.3.3 and 2.3.4 respectively.

The framework's bidirectional arrows illustrate the complex interplay between the various university and student psychosocial influences that determine individual levels of SE. The inclusion of 'relationships' within the psychosocial influences lends support to the view that

substantive engagement “depends on what teachers and students do together and how they work in terms of each other; neither can do it alone” (Nystrand and Gamoran, 1991).

#### **2.4.4.1 University psychosocial Influences**

The HE student population is increasingly more diverse in age, experience, cultural background and socioeconomic status (Biggs, 2011). Whereas in the past those entering HE were the brightest, the most highly motivated, and arguably the most privileged, classes now comprise students of varying ability, interest and motivation, presenting academic staff with additional challenges and placing greater and different demands on their teaching skills (Mulryan-Kyne, 2010). There is it seems ‘different worlds in the same classroom’ (Perry, 1985).

##### **2.4.4.1.1 Teaching**

Numerous studies have demonstrated the impact of tutors and teaching practice on SE (Kahu, 2013; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). However, ‘engagement’ is an issue inextricably linked to the scholarship of teaching and learning rather than a single, clearly defined issue. Recent empirical research findings indicate that course characteristics (for example transparency of the assessment(s)) as well as student characteristics (for example gender, level of domain knowledge on entry to the programme) influence academic performance (a potential driver of SE), in particular, the time a student invests in their studies (Masui et al. 2012). Tutors need therefore to promote and encourage student engagement, retention and completion through an inclusive and engaging curriculum that reflects an enhanced understanding of students and their learning needs (Stefani, 2008). The means by which student engagement is encouraged and measured must accommodate the different ways at different stages in the student experience (and in different contexts) that engagement is exhibited (Markwell, 2007; Perry, 1985). To avoid any disjuncture between the teacher’s sense making and the sense making of student, the manner in which a student is taught needs to be appropriate for the stage they have reached on their learning journey, particularly in the earlier stages (Perry, 1985).

A student’s views and expectations of their teachers change as they progress, at varying speeds, through their individual learning journey (Perry, 1985). Schmidt and Moust (1995) suggest that tutor sensitivity towards student difficulties arising in the learning environment



and an authentic interest in the student's life and learning are necessary conditions of tutor effectiveness. An effective tutor demonstrates a willingness to be a 'student among students', seeks an informal relationship and displays a caring attitude and personal interest in the student. This 'cognitive congruence' (Schmidt and Moust, 1995) results in more intrinsic student interest in the subject matter and extended self-study time (self-directed learning activities). Whilst appropriate subject expertise enables the tutor to follow the student's line of thinking, tutor expertise, demonstrated for example through an active research interest in the field in question, can have varying effects on student achievement. Where students have limited prior knowledge of the subject matter, and tutor guidance is therefore essential, achievement is likely to be greater. However, the tutor-to student-exchanges involved in such guidance can be at the expense of involving students in their own learning (Schmidt and Moust, 1995). HE is described by Yorke and Longden (2008) as a mechanism to see how far one can stretch and be stretched. Arguably, this view of HE applies equally to tutors and students. However, tutors need to resist the temptation to address in their teaching the needs of the more responsive students at the expense of the less responsive who may consequently "feel they are outsiders to the enterprise" Perry (1985). Settings are needed in which students feel empowered to learn new and better sense making at the same time as recognising (with tutor encouragement) that their perhaps overly simple previous sense-making was a necessary step on their learning journey and therefore legitimate in its own time (Perry, 1985).

Important (rather than exhibited) tutor behaviours and characteristics identified in a small-scale single German university study by Voss and Gruber (2006) are listed in Table 3. Students suggested positive relationships between the behaviours and characteristics identified and positive learning outcomes for example, a learning conducive classroom atmosphere can enhance student motivation, and the acquisition of skills and knowledge can improve performance in assessments. These important tutor behaviours and characteristics (Voss and Gruber, 2006) echo the findings of earlier studies including for example Ramsden's (2003) six essential principles of effective university teaching, and Bryson and Hand's (2007) three levels of tutor engagement including discourse with students, enthusiasm for the subject, and professionalism with the teaching process.

**Table 3 Important tutor behaviours and characteristics (Voss and Gruber, 2006)**

1. Subject expertise
2. Approachability, open to suggestions and criticism
3. Communication skills, messages tailored to accommodate student language ability and preferences
4. Teaching skills, demonstrated through appropriate course content and logically structured sessions
5. Friendliness, related in particular to body language and non-verbal cues
6. Enthusiasm and interest in the subject
7. Humour, being funny
8. Teaching methods suitable and varied

The once dominant perception in higher education was that discipline knowledge was sufficient for quality teaching (Coates, 2005). The assumption that a PhD assured competency in teaching and thus the appointment of junior lecturers on the strength of their research credentials alone was according to Crittendon (1997), one of the curious features of academic life. More recent research (Coates, 2005) suggests that the reviewing of the teaching qualifications held by academic staff often occurs in attempts to monitor the quality of university teaching. Contemporary constructivist theories suggest that learning rather than teaching is what really matters in education, and that good teaching leads to good learning. From this perspective, the quality of teaching is dependent upon rather than independent of the quality of learning that it engenders. Universities should be about more than getting qualifications (Bryson and Hand, 2008). “Learning is more important than grading” (Nilsen, 2009:5). A tutor’s contemporary industry knowledge is particularly important to students returning from industrial placement. Students have suggested that being taught by tutors in touch with the industry context, particularly on professional courses where accreditation or exemptions are available, can enhance their employability (Kandiko and Mawer, 2013).

There are according to Bourner (1997) various learning aims of higher education. These include the dissemination of contemporary knowledge, to develop in students the capabilities to use others ideas and information, and the ability to generate and test ideas and evidence

(Bourner 1997). Other aims include the facilitation of students' personal development and development of their capacity to plan and manage their own learning. Cuseo (2007) notes broad agreement in the relevant literature that the use of "engaging pedagogy" (involvement with peers, faculty, and the course itself in for example class discussions and group work) is positively associated with student satisfaction. According to Barnett (2009) the pedagogies that are more likely to elicit the formation of the dispositions and qualities the disciplinary field requires include those that:

- require students to engage with each other, such that 'respect for others', 'generosity' and a 'preparedness to listen' might be engendered;
- make explicit the relevant standards such that 'carefulness' and 'restraint' might ensue;
- are encouraging, such that a student might develop the 'preparedness to keep going forward' and 'hold (herself) out to new experiences';
- enthuse the students, giving them new spirit, and so usher forth their 'will to learn';
- require students to put forward their own profferings in order that the 'courage' to take up a position and stake a claim might be developed;
- require students to give of themselves and be active in and towards the situations that they find themselves in and so develop 'a will to engage'.

Rather than concentrating exclusively on the teacher's own perceptions of the content, the teaching in Prosser and Trigwell's (1999) student-focused strategy, focuses on the students' views of the subject matter and aims to develop their conceptions further. Foster et al. (2009) suggest that when students can see a connection between what is being discussed and issues in their own lives, they may be more likely to actively engage in class discussion.

As discussed in section 2.4.3.1.1, whilst there is a compelling case against large class teaching in HE its prevalence seems to be increasing rather than abating (Maringe and Sing, 2014) and, it is safe to say "will remain so in the foreseeable future" (Cooper and Robinson, 2000:6). If larger classes are to become the accepted norm in UKHE then appropriate teaching approaches will be required however Finn et al. (2003) contend that in reality teaching practice is resistant to change. "Teachers adapt their practices slowly and marginally as new materials and techniques are introduced" (Stasz and Stecher 2002:29). For meaningful learning to occur on large undergraduate courses, the tutor must provide a course that engages their students' attention, and the students must engage with the course content (McGroarty et al. 2004). This may involve moving beyond the 'traditional' lecture to more

active forms of teaching and learning in order to provide quality education in large classes Mulryan-Kyne (2010). Tutors need to find creative ways of dealing with some of the specific challenges, in particular those related to levels of interaction and feedback. This will likely require additional work and a change in mind-set to deal with the discomfort and anxiety that is often associated with change, the lack of incentives for change and the self-perceptions of staff and their definition of their roles (Bonwell and Eison, 1991). The appropriateness and success of the large-group teaching approaches adopted will be determined by the extent to which students accept and respond to the greater responsibility for learning these require (Bonwell and Eison, 1991). In relation to co-creation of teaching and Bovill et al. (2016) note that students make the transition from passive recipient to active agent when they take authentic responsibility in the educational process. When this happens a parallel transition is required, in which the academic shifts from disciplinary content expert to facilitator of shared enquiry and learning (Bovill et al. 2016).

Although widely used in higher education, lectures are widely believed to be effective in fostering memorization of lower-level factual material but less effective when measures of long-term knowledge retention, transfer of knowledge to new situations, measures of higher-order thinking, attitude change, and motivation for further learning are assessed (McKeachie 1986). While 42% of the content was retained by students assessed immediately after the lecture this dropped to 20% in assessments conducted one week later (Gardiner, 1994). Research suggests that around half of the time during lectures undergraduates are thinking about things unrelated to the lecture content (Cuseo, 2007). Also susceptible to attention “drift” are highly motivated postgraduate students (Stuart and Rutheford, 1978) and learning-oriented (versus grade-oriented) undergraduate students (Milton et al. 1986). Time on task (paying full attention) in lectures tends to drop off after the first ten to twenty minutes and to pick up later on in anticipation of the end of the lecture (Penner, 1984; Verner and Dickson, 1967 in McKeachie, 1986). Similar decreases are evident in the thoroughness of student note taking over the course of the lecture (Gardiner, 1994). The contact time that students value most is in tutorials rather than lectures, and tutorials that are not predominantly student-led and not lacking tutor input (Kandiko 2003).

According to McKeachie (1999), Cuseo (1998), and Costin (1972) appropriate uses of the lecture include:

- To organize, integrate, and update reading materials
- To model problem solving and critical thinking as conducted by an advanced practitioner in the field
- To demonstrate enthusiasm for the subject matter
- To relate course-relevant personal experiences to the students
- To explain and develop complex concepts and ideas introduced in the reading
- To provide context for issues and ideas and information introduced in the reading

Bligh's (2002) recommendation, following an extensive review of related research is that lectures should be used to teach information and not as a means to promoting thought, change in attitudes or behavioural skills. Johnson et al. (1998) suggest that lectures may be useful when a teacher with limited time needs to integrate information and points of view from a large variety of sources. Lecture preparation provides the tutor with an opportunity to update, synthesize, and reflect on course content (Cooper and Robinson, 2000).

Whilst there is a weight of evidence in favour of more active learning, this needs to be balanced with support and guidance for faculty to allow them to address the obstacles Bonwell and Eison (1991) associated with the use of active learning approaches. These include,

- The difficulty in adequately covering the assigned course content in the limited class time available;
- A possible increase in the amount of preparation time;
- The difficulty of using active learning in large classes;
- A lack of needed materials, equipment, or resources.

Exeter et al. (2010) however note that commonly used small class techniques, such as problem-based learning, small-group discussions and strategies that enable students to ask questions frequently, are used to optimise opportunities for student engagement in very large classes.

Significant academic learning happens both inside and outside the classroom, for example, and in particular in extra-curricular activities or in residential settings (Light 2001). Beyond-class experiences add value to formal learning activities, yet institutions only have information about how students spend their time in-class. Their capacity to explicitly manage the student experience, and to leverage out-of-class time to enhance learning, is therefore limited (Coates, 2005). However, Kember et al (1999) note that student out of class time on

task (effort) can be spent productively and/or unproductively, complicating the relationship between effort and levels of achievement. This is significant given the expectation in UKHE that students will engage in a specified amount of independent study per unit credit. Students that are encouraged and supported to manage their own learning will feel more confident about engaging with feedback (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006) thus maximising their learning. However, passive students may find the concept of self-managed learning more demanding than active students may. Engaging passive students in learning is difficult. Engaging part-time students who are often non-traditional with varying educational profiles is challenging. However, the challenges that feedback presents for all of these students will be less daunting if they are encouraged within the curriculum to embrace self-managed learning (Rae and Cochrane, 2008:227).

#### 2.4.4.1.2 Tutor development

In an increasingly complex academic environment, there is a need for more training and support for academics in their teaching role (Van Schalkwyk et al. 2015). As Rowntree (1981 in Broughan and Grantham, 2012) suggests, successful educational development is preceded by staff development.

Bonwell and Eison (1991) suggest that common barriers to instructional change include:

- The powerful influence of educational tradition;
- Faculty self-perceptions and self-definition of roles;
- The discomfort and anxiety that change creates;
- The limited incentives for faculty to change.

These impediments to change are likely to be compounded by a lack of knowledge about, and a lack of confidence implementing alternative teaching approaches.

The link between improved teaching and effective student learning remains unproven according to Trowler and Bamber (2005). Gibbs and Coffey (2004) conclude that training can increase teachers' student focus, improve a number of aspects of teaching as judged by students (e.g. organisation, group interaction, rapport) and change teachers such that their students improve their learning. The informal process of learning now prevalent in Higher Education must be structured (Youssef et al. 2015). Students are autonomously exploring new technologies and accessing digital education content outside the classroom. It is essential

therefore, that teachers are trained so that they can include these new forms of learning in their curricula thereby strengthening the student's e-skills allowing them to absorb learning informally (Youssef et al. 2015).

Of continuing relevance are Bonwell and Eison's (1991) claims of reluctance amongst academic tutors to engage in instructional change due to the inherent risks involved. Risks identified include student non-participation, not using higher-order thinking, or not learning sufficient content, and the tutors themselves feeling a loss of control, lacking the necessary skills, or facing criticism for teaching in unorthodox ways (Bonwell and Eison, 1991).

Evidence suggests that the multiple goals for introducing lecturer training courses are not being met. Powerful workgroup cultures within departments can operate against innovation, and hinder the transfer of trainee lecturers' learning back into their departments (Trowler and Bamber, 2005). Disciplinary teaching conventions are accepted uncritically by most staff (Kogan et al 1994) and educational development courses have tended to be insensitive to disciplinary differences (McGuinness, 1997). They have also encouraged the development of reflective practitioners without a consensus on what this is, giving little thought as to whether they will have any power to change things (Trowler and Bamber, 2005). There is a false assumption in Institutional training policies designed to enhance teaching and learning that individual change will lead to systemic change. Policies based on 'methodological individualism' do not lead to institutional change (Trowler and Bamber, 2005). "No matter how many reflective practitioners a university has, it will not become a learning organisation unless other things are in place" (Kim, 1993).

Gibbs and Coffey (2004) suggest that compulsory training might be a valuable component of learning and teaching enhancement but according to Trowler and Bamber (2005) it needs to be supplemented with other resources, structures and processes if it is to meet the aspirations of policy-makers. Compulsory teacher training is not only about the teacher, it is also about student learning, and the institutional and HE system context in which the teacher is operating (Trowler and Bamber, 2005). Instead of simply running the courses, educational developers must use their skills as agents of change to counter opposition to educational development and resistance to change in the environment within which compulsory training is delivered (Gibbs and Coffey, 2004).

Browne (2010) suggested that HE teaching staff qualifications would become a factor influencing student choice. Growing numbers of institutional accreditation schemes are indicative of an assumption by HEIs that accreditation will lead to improved teacher performance, which will improve the students' experience of learning (Spowart et al. 2016), an assumption with little evidential support (Gibbs, 2010). The professionalisation of teaching is welcomed by many but 'is regarded with deep suspicion by some' (Quinn, 2012).

There is an apparent assumption that the continuing professional development associated with accreditation schemes is aimed at established teachers (Spowart et al. 2016). The relevance therefore of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) accreditation to new teachers, and the extent to which it can improve their teaching and enhance their student's learning is debated (Parsons and Taylor, 2011). However, the level of reflection and change encouraged and intended in the accreditation process will be determined by for example, the participant's motivation (De Rijdt C. et al. 2013), the time and support available to them to prepare, and the culture within their department. Respondents in Spowart et al's (2016) research, who work within professional body aligned disciplines placed more value on their professional body recognition than on HEA UKPSF accreditation.

#### 2.4.4.1.3 Tutor Workload

Whilst institutional characteristics directly influence SE (Astin, 1984, 1985; Marsh, 2014), institutional policies and practices can create barriers to tutor motivation and engagement (Markwell, 2007). This according to Markwell (2007) is evident in observations of increasing pressures on academics to publish; deterioration in the staff-student ratio; an increasingly diverse student body and increasing numbers of part-time associate lecturers. If tutors are to engage in 'SE enhancing' extra-curricular activities then a review of the institutional policies and practices in place will be needed (Markwell, 2007). Whilst the role of individual staff in SE is important, a wider institutional approach that provides the necessary resources and supports both students and staff to be engaged is required (Bryson and Hand, 2007).

Nilsen (2009) questions a perceived institutional emphasis on research rather than teaching, and highlights the benefits of employing academics with teaching qualifications, and the provision of training in "university pedagogic" to new and existing academics. Good teaching



leads to good learning Nilsen (2009) and discipline knowledge alone is not sufficient for quality teaching Coates (2005).

Faculty research performance is a determinant of university ranking (Bak and Kim, 2015). However, it is not just the profile of the university that is affected when research and teaching tasks are combined; it is also the work portfolio of individual academics (Magi and Beerkens, 2016). Although research productivity and teaching effectiveness should ideally be complementary (Marsh and Hattie, 2002), Magi and Beerkens (2016) report a spectrum of views on this in the research-teaching nexus literature ranging from mutually reinforcing, to separate enterprises, to competing activities. Arimoto (2015) suggests there is an evident trajectory away from teaching-centred or balanced research-teaching models towards research-centred models. Whilst this situation might sound problematic for teaching, according to (Bak and Kim, 2015), there is no clear evidence that faculty involvement in research enhances or competes with teaching quality or effectiveness. However the practice of using research grants to 'buy out' teaching is not uncommon (Bak and Kim, 2015) with adjunct staff employed often on teaching only contracts to cover the teaching affected (Magi and Beerkens, 2016).

Claims that teaching is less valued than research within institutions are not uncommon amongst academics nor is questioning the reliability of student feedback as a measure of teaching practice in performance appraisals (Van Schalkwyk et al. 2015). These authors called for a review of the responsibilities associated with the other, often-competing roles academic tutors are required to fulfil (e.g. research, administration) alongside their teaching. Academic staff overwhelmed by the pressure to publish and undertake consultancy in addition to their teaching role are more likely to resort to traditional teaching and assessment methods such as the lecture and written exam (Mulryan-Kyne, 2010).

#### **2.4.4.2 Relationships**

According to Wadd (1979:44) "Interaction becomes a relationship when it is predictable to the individuals involved, that is, when each participant has some 'particular expectation' of the likelihood of [their] own wants being satisfied and has developed some fairly consistent response to what [they perceive] (correctly or not) as the other's wants". A relationship can be described as harmonious where the wants of both parties are met willingly and thus

become an expectation, or where despite an element of conflict, intensely held wants are substantively met (Wadd, 1979)

In the student-tutor relationship, both parties bring their own learning and teaching related wants. Wadd (1979) notes however that questions remain as to whether a tutor should accede to all students wants in order to achieve a harmonious relationship and in so doing compromise their own wants. It is the relationship between teacher and student (the pedagogical relationship) that actively works (or not) to elicit the dispositions and qualities the student can then use to appropriate the curriculum in ways meaningful to them (Barnett, 2009).

Trust and respect are fundamental to the 'special' symbiotic student/tutor relationship as are approaches to teaching that encourage collaboration rather than dependency (Broughan and Grantham, 2012). Corroboration of this position can be found in the Walsh et al. (2009) research findings that identify the academic tutor as most likely source of academic advice for the vast majority of students, and in particular first year students, who sought it. Although the physical and temporal availability of the academic tutor can determine whether a student seeks their support, academic tutors and peers on the course were more likely than any of the other university provided support to be consulted (Walsh et al. 2009).

A student's perception of the quality of the educational service they receive is dependent on their expectations and values (Telford and Masson 2005). There is a manifest interest in government policy documents and in the academic literature, particularly in light of changes to tuition fee arrangements, in the understanding and management of undergraduate student expectations and the student-tutor relationship.

The increasing marketisation of the HE sector has arguably led to the redefinition of the student-university relationship and increasing interest in the student psychological contract (PC). The PC concept, first introduced by Argyris in 1961, is an attempt to encapsulate the unwritten expectations held by employees and their line managers in respect of each other. In a higher education context, the student PC is often assumed to have been adopted when student first enrolls on a programme of study (Moore et al. 2008). The beliefs a student forms at this point of entry are an attempt to fill the 'gaps' in their individual knowledge and

understanding of the university with their own perceptions, based on such things as previous experience (Bryson et al. 2011). The resulting expectations form the basis of the PC. The uncertainty faced, and the consequent gaps in knowledge needing to be filled by new students, particularly those with little or no family HE experience to draw on can be significant (Bryson et al. 2011). The PC is an implicit part of the student-tutor relationship and violations of any of its elements can negatively affect the quality of the learning relationship and, ultimately, student attainment, a recognised measure of engagement.

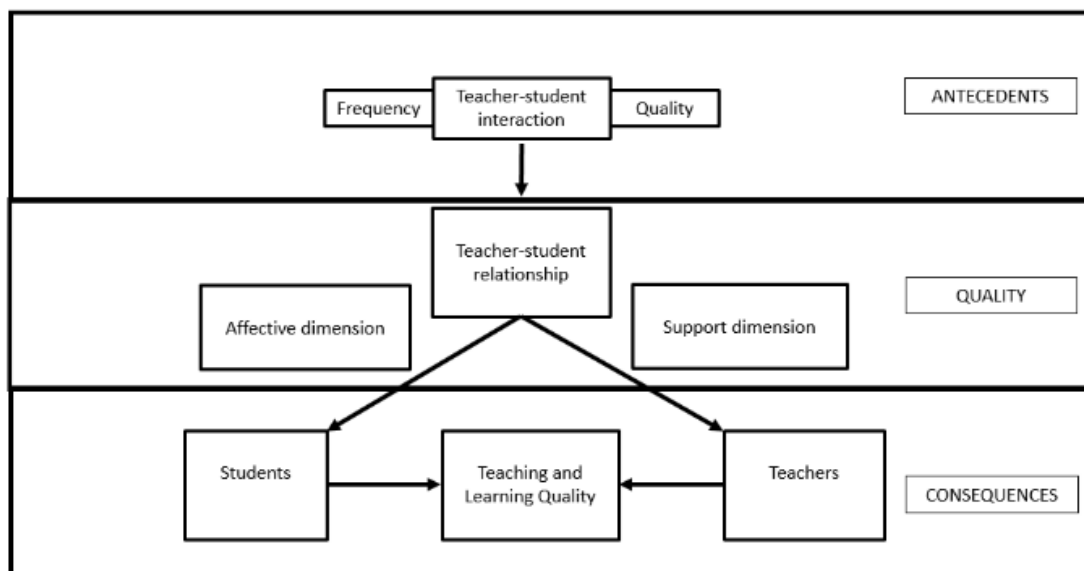
Student expectations are encapsulated in the PC, which in the HE context refers to “the tacitly held agreement between a student and the institution about the nature of their exchange and relationship in the process of education” (Nicholson et al. 2011:2). In principle, the PC could manifest through a relationship between the student and any member of staff working for the institution. Failure to meet student expectations constitutes a breach of the PC, which can negatively affect two key institutional performance indicators, student satisfaction and withdrawal.

In relation to the gap between expectations and experience, Jones (2017) noted that for WP students in particular, the culture and curricula of higher education initially experienced were inconsistent with the students’ expectations. Although part of what makes higher education ‘higher’ is the requirement for students to embrace more independent forms of learning (Barnett 1990; Perez-Adamson and Mercer 2016), the individual active contribution expected at university (Jones, 2017) contrasts with the passivity and rote learning experience of many students at their previous education institution. Independent school educated students reported the assessment support and guidance offered by the university to be less personalised than expected (Jones, 2017). Expectations of independent study and academic behavioural confidence are factors related to undergraduate academic performance in students who choose to persist with their studies (Nicholson et al. 2011), and according to Charlton et al. (2006) and (Yorke, 2002) amongst the reasons why some students decide to withdraw.

Questions have arisen around the values that the student PC represents and whether they are shared across the student population or are specific to the individual student. Universities faced with increasing competition from within the HE sector and more recently from HE

providers in the private sector are under increasing pressure to respond effectively to student expectations of the learning agreement. Whilst an understanding of students' perceptions of the PC is of vital importance, particularly for universities that consider the student to be a primary stakeholder (Koskina, 2011), the understanding of the tutor's perceptions, also a primary stakeholder, is equally important.

The Teacher-Student Relationship (TSR) according to R. Smith (2007) is considered to be the crux of the learning situation and yet is under-researched in the context of HE (Hagenauer and Volet, 2014; Walker and Gleaves, 2016). Though complex, the TSR is fundamental in the development of the student as an independent learner committed to their chosen studies (Broughan and Grantham, 2012). The extant TSR literature focuses predominantly on schools, where the relationship is adult-child/adolescent, with much less attention on HE where the relationship is adult-adult (Hagenauer and Volet, 2014). Responding to a perceived need to



**Figure 3 Exploring TSR in higher education – a heuristic framework for future research (Hagenauer and Volet, 2014:383)**

systematically examine TSR in HE, Hagenauer and Volet (2014) propose a heuristic framework for future research seen in Figure 3. The framework presents TSR as a multi-dimensional, context dependent construct, thereby challenging the feasibility of developing standardised measures or producing generalizable findings. Notwithstanding this, Hagenauer and Volet (2014) advocate a deeper understanding of the quality as well as the frequency of teacher-student interactions, and an extended understanding of the consequences of TSR for students

and teachers, in particular the effects on both of the TSR effects on the quality of teaching and learning in HE.

Whilst TSR in HE is often considered in terms of its relationship to study, retention, and dropout decisions, it has wider importance because of the impact it can have across different educational contexts on motivation, social competence and specific educational outcomes (Hagenauer and Volet, 2014). The TSR can also encourage tutor persistence in HE (Broughan and Grantham, 2012).

The TSR takes time to develop, during which the student develops their knowledge of the 'rules of the game'. Positive SE and learning requires institutions and staff to generate the conditions that stimulate and encourage student involvement (Davis and Murrell, 1993) and to create learning communities that students feel part of (Lear et al. 2010; Zhao and Kuh, 2004). It is therefore dependent on the ability of the tutor to provide an agile and dynamic learning environment in which the boundaries of knowledge and understanding are constantly pushed (Welch 2006 in Broughan and Grantham, 2012). Establishing the conditions favourable to the development of this 'special' relationship is problematic in an environment driven by metrics such as league tables (Broughan and Grantham, 2012). Research reviewed by Hagenauer and Volet (2014) attribute low levels of formal student-tutor interactions to students feeling tutors were too busy to meet with them or, in the case of sessional/part-time staff, unavailable or unable to locate a suitable meeting 'space'. Whilst student-tutor interactions can and do occur in the classroom, and particularly in seminar settings (Hagenauer and Volet, 2014), large class sizes are likely to impede interactions that are individually supportive in nature. This is important because, as Hagenauer and Volet (2014) suggest, the benefits of student-tutor interactions are not always clear to students who also view interactions that are negative in nature as 'costly'.

Student-tutor interactions in the UK and US HE contexts take place in scheduled office hours during which students without a pre-arranged appointment can meet tutors. In a survey-based study at a large US research institution M. Smith et al. (2017) identified a mismatch between student perceptions of office hours and the institutions intentions for them was identified, which resulted in an underuse of office hours. Explicit guidance for students on

what office hours can offer and how to make use of this resource was recommended as a solution (Smith et al. 2017).

#### **2.4.5 The student engagement element**

The variable at the centre of the Kahu (2013) framework (see Figure 1) is the state of student engagement which, drawing on Fredricks et al. (2004), encompasses three distinct yet interdependent rather than discrete and disconnected dimensions; ‘affect’, ‘cognition’, and ‘behaviour’ (labelled ‘student’). These dimensions are respectively representative of the psychological, cognitive and behavioural perspectives of SE evident in the SE literature. The ‘affect’ dimension acknowledges the emotional aspects of engagement such as the sense of belonging to the institution, interest in and enthusiasm for the topic, and juxtaposes instrumental motivations to engage (for example behavioural and cognitive engagement as a means to an end) with intrinsic motivations to engage (driven by pleasure and interest in the learning). Kahu (2013) describes the ‘cognition’ dimension as concerning learner self-regulation and the effectiveness of their use of deep learning strategies. The ‘student’ dimension encapsulates positive learner conduct, and thus behavioural engagement, such as compliance with rules including attendance, and involvement in learning including asking questions and time on task, and participation in extracurricular activities (Fredricks et al. 2004; Kahu, 2013).

#### **2.4.6 Elements of student engagement summary**

##### **Sociocultural influences**

The UK government’s positioning of HE as ‘an industry for enhancing national competitiveness and as a lucrative service that can be sold in the global marketplace’ (Naidoo 2003 in McArthur, 2009:740) is driving university agendas (McCullough, 2009). Marketisation has increased competition within the HE sector and introduced the perception of the student as a customer, which overemphasises one aspect of the student’s role and the university’s mission, and deemphasises the student’s role in learning and (McCullough, 2009). An emerging ‘consumerist ethos’ amongst students is evident in challenges to the value-for-money, as measured by contact time, that their university education is providing (Kandiko and Mawer, 2013).

Whilst widening participation initiatives have increased the numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds entering HE, HEFCE 2016 data indicates these students are more likely to discontinue their studies after the first year. This situation has potential performance implications for HEIs involved in widening participation initiatives. HE is an expensive undertaking for students but many, in particular WP students, were found by Vigurs et al. (2016), to be unnecessarily constrained in their graduate choices due to 'best guessing', often inaccurately, the potential impact of the debt repayment on their futures. According to Cooke et al. (2004), the need for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to work in term time to alleviate the financial pressures they are under, makes it less likely that they will engage in the social, non-academic university activities that engender an SE enhancing sense of belonging. Although part-time work can provide real-life experiences for students to reflect on and apply in-class learning to (Kuh, 2010), it presents competing demands on the time students are required to attend timetabled sessions and to undertake independent study.

### **Structural Influences**

Kahu (2013) categorises the structural influences as university or student structural influences. University structural influences include the policies and practices of the institution permeate all aspects of the student's HE experience, influencing and shaping the institution-student relationship and the nature and levels of the student's engagement (Wilms 2003 in Zyngier, 2008). To ensure a common understanding of what the institution seeks to achieve in terms of SE, Baron and Corbin (2012) recommend a 'whole-of-university' rather than a tutor, school or faculty approach. Whether this is the case at NWU will be explored in this study.

The reported gap between eligibility and readiness for university (Shulock, 2010; Wilson-Strydom, 2016) could be addressed through meaningful, long-term university-school/college partnerships that work to increase awareness of the capabilities underpinning university readiness and inform decision-making about courses of study much earlier than at the point of application or registration (Wilson-Strydom, 2016). Unmet expectations and inappropriate choice of course are key reasons for withdrawal (Baxter and Hatt, 2000), so the experience that universities 'sell' students must be deliverable (Kandiko and Mawer, 2013) and delivered. This study will seek to discover what is happening at NWU to close this gap.

Noting a tendency among HEIs to focus their efforts to improve SE on teaching and support, Kahu (2013) suggests an alternative focus on increasing awareness among students of the range of variables within their control, that can impact positively and negatively on their engagement and success at university. The extent to which this is, or could be the case at NWU will be explored in this study.

Class size is a key variable in the "production" of learning or knowledge (Ehrenberg et al. 2001). Large classes, which are associated with the massification evident in HE, allow HEIs to accommodate greater numbers of students with less resources (Hornsby and Osman, 2014). Whilst "larger class sizes may be seen as an alluringly quick and convenient cost-cutting strategy" Cuseo (2007:5), evidence suggests diminishing returns in terms of opportunities to learn as class sizes increase (Cuseo, 2004). There is a positive association between small class size and the development of higher-level thinking skills however smaller classes require and, according to (Ehrenberg et al. 2001); presuppose the availability of vacant classrooms and teachers who are equivalent in quality to existing teachers for the extra classes.

Large classes can be problematic for the student transition for the first time into HE. Mulryan-Kyne (2010) reported students being uncomfortable and confused, spending their first weeks in a 'state of shock' (p27) and feeling anonymous in their large classes. There is often a palpable distance between students and the teacher in large classes (Mulryan-Kyne, 2010) and less opportunity for the student-faculty interaction strongly associated with retention academic achievement, critical thinking and educational aspiration (Astin, 1993; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993 in Cuseo, 2007).

Other issues associated with large classes are distracting student behaviours (e.g. arriving early and/or late and distracting off-task behaviour) the anonymity and impersonal nature of large groups can elicit, with absenteeism unnoticed or tolerated (Carbone, 1999). For tutors large volumes of marking and student feedback are potential problems associated with large class teaching (Ward and Jenkins, 1992). Tutor views on the implications for themselves and their students of the large class teaching at NWU will be investigated in this study.

Despite the variation in conceptualisations of the term 'curriculum' (Fraser and Bosanquet, 2006), it is according to one of the most important products HEIs offer their customers.



Curricular should therefore be sufficiently demanding to engender 'resilience'; offer contrasting insights and perspectives encouraging the development of 'openness'; and require a continual presence and commitment, encouraging 'self-discipline' on the part of the student (Barnett, 2009).

The early acculturation of the student into the discourse of the disciplinary field(s) to which their course of study belongs is essential (Stefani, 2008). Tutors should enable students to grasp the nature of the discourse rather than assume that they do (Stefani, 2008). Tutors views on the nature and meaning of curriculum and thoughts on the discourse of their disciplines will be explored in this study.

Assessment according to Gibbs (1999:41) is 'the most powerful lever teachers have to influence the way students respond to a course and behave as learners', and more influential to learning behaviour and learners' experience than teaching (Bloxham, 2007). Indeed, the learning activities that students engage in as part of their assessment preparations are, according to Gibbs and Simpson (2005) arguably more important to the learning than the mark awarded. Boud (1990) cautions against assessment tasks that encourage the reproduction of what the tutor has presented rather than the desired deep understanding and critical thinking. Students, according to (Boud, 1990), should be encouraged to develop the skills of learning how to learn, how to monitor their own work, establish their own criteria and make their own judgements about the worth of their achievements. Whether tutors at NWU share this view will be investigated in this study.

Although according to Cuseo (2007), assessment that is more frequent would encourage students to study more consistently and evenly throughout the term, Gibbs and Simpson (2005) point to the difficulties in a climate of increasing class sizes, of designing assessment regimes that do not increase marking. Feedback, an integral aspect of assessment and critically important to student learning and retention (Yorke, 2001), also needs to be manageable, for the tutor and the student receiving it (Race, 2004). Students should be taught how to interpret and use feedback (Gibbs and Simpson 2004 in Glover and Brown, 2006), that focuses on content rather than personal characteristics and encourages learning rather than measuring failure (Gibbs and Simpson, 2005). Again, NWU tutor views on these assessment matters will be explored in this study.

Student structural influences include the improved career prospects and career enhancements that are amongst the key reasons for entering HE. As consumers of HE, students expect their chosen HEI will equip them with the necessary employability skills and offer them employability advice and guidance necessary to achieve this (Kandiko and Mawer, 2013). Unmet expectations, for example about the nature of teaching and learning, are a key reason for withdrawal from HE, a situation more likely to arise for students who do not have the HE experience of family and friends to draw on. Walsh et al. (2009) note that positive outcomes for the student are possible if the differences in student and institution perceptions are ameliorated and bridged by assimilation or adaptation processes. Although alienation and disengagement are recognised HEI concerns, particularly amongst non-traditional students, they are more likely to persist through to graduation if they are actively engaged in educationally purposeful activities inside and outside of the classroom (Harper and Quaye, 2009). The importance of creating a sense of cohort and a feeling of being on the same journey amongst a diverse student body (Markwell, 2007) is reinforced by Walsh et al's (2009) finding that irrespective of demography, the vast majority of students facing non-academic issues seek support and advice from friends on their course, or their family members.

A growing area of concern in HE is student mental health and wellbeing. According to (Thorley, 2017), student mental health condition disclosures at UK universities have increased significantly over the past 10 years. Whilst a lack of mental health and wellbeing support can lead to an increased risk of student withdrawal or the risk of suicide in the most severe cases, in many UK universities, the strategic response to this issue has been sub-optimal.

This study will seek to understand how tutors perceive the support NWU offer students facing non-academic issues that research suggests can affect significantly SE and ultimately influence decisions to persist or withdraw.

### **Psychosocial influences**

Kahu (2013) differentiates between university psychosocial influences and student psychosocial influences that are the focus of the emotional dimension of student engagement.

HE classes comprise students of varying age, experience, cultural background, socio-economic status, ability, interest and motivation are presenting tutors with additional challenges and placing different and greater demands on their teaching skills (Mulryan-Kyne, 2010). Engagement is not a single, clearly defined issue but it is inextricably linked to the scholarship of teaching and learning. SE, retention and completion need to be promoted and encouraged through an inclusive and engaging curriculum (Stefani, 2008). Teaching needs to be appropriate for the stage of the learning journey students have reached however, the temptation for tutors to address the needs of the more responsive students at the expense of the less responsive must be avoided (Perry, 1985).

According to Bryson and Hand (2008), the quality of teaching should be determined by the learning it engenders; university should not just about the qualifications gained. The Voss and Gruber (2006) important tutor behaviours and characteristics reflect a consensus in the literature and include an enthusiastic, interested, subject expert, friendly, good sense of humour and approachable, able to accommodate student language ability when communicating, able to deliver appropriate course content in logically structured sessions using suitable and varied teaching methods. The teaching should focus on the students' views of the subject with the aim of developing their conceptions further rather than concentrating exclusively on the teacher's perceptions of the content (Prosser and Trigwell 1999). Foster et al (2009) suggest that a student will be more likely to actively engage in class discussions when they see a connection to their own lives in what is being discussed.

The ease with which teaching can achieve these aims will be explored in this study. Class size for instance is highlighted as a consideration in the choice of appropriate teaching strategies (see for example Cuseo, 2007; Exeter et al. 2010; McGroarty et al. 2004; Mulryan-Kyne, 2010).

There is little doubt that the increasingly complex academic environment has created a need for more training and support for academic tutors in their teaching roles (Van Schalkwyk et al. 2015). Students are themselves exploring new technologies and accessing digital education content outside of the classroom and so it is essential that teachers be trained so that they can include these new forms of learning in their curricula (Youssef et al, 2015). Tutor discomfort and anxiety are attributed to the risks associated with instructional change,

including for example, lacking the necessary skills, feeling a loss of control, compromised sufficiency of learning content, student non-participation (Bonwell and Eison, 1991). The resistance to change this can encourage needs to be countered by educational developers using their skills as agents of change (Gibbs and Coffey, 2004) in educational development courses that overcome the tendency to be insensitive to disciplinary differences (McGuinness, 1997).

Given the important role of the tutor in SE, it is important that institutional policies and practices do not create barriers to their motivation and engagement (Markwell, 2007). Striking an appropriate balance between teaching and research commitments is one of a number of considerations needed in an institutional approach that Bryson and Hand (2007) suggest should provide the necessary resources and support both students and staff to be engaged. There are wider implications of not addressing these issues including for example the previously mentioned resistance to change in teaching practices from tutors overwhelmed by the pressure of the competing roles they are required to fulfil (Mulryan-Kyne, 2010).

The relationship between the tutor and the student (the TSR) is considered to be the crux of the learning situation (Smith, 2007). Where this pedagogical relationship is positive, for example where there is mutual trust and respect (Brougham and Grantham, 2012), it can actively work to elicit the dispositions and qualities the student can then use to appropriate the curriculum in ways meaningful to them (Barnett, 2009). Students are more likely to consult tutors than any other institutional support (Walsh et al, 2009). The physical and temporal availability of the tutor which can determine whether a student seeks their support (Walsh et al, 2009) needs to be accommodated in the tutor workload. Haganauer and Volet (2014) attribute low levels of formal student-tutor interactions to students feeling tutors were too busy to meet with them. NWU tutor experiences of the tutor-student relationship will be explored in this study.

### **Student engagement**

Kahu's (2013) framework captures the individualistic nature of engagement, that is, how an individual at a specific point in time experiences engagement. This experience differs

according to the variable weightings of the engagement influencing factors at that point in time. For example, a student moving between classes may experience a different level of engagement that is determined by their relationship with the different tutors, the level of aptitude they feel they have in each subject and how close the time of each class is to lunchtime.

## **2.5 The conceptual framework underpinning this thesis**

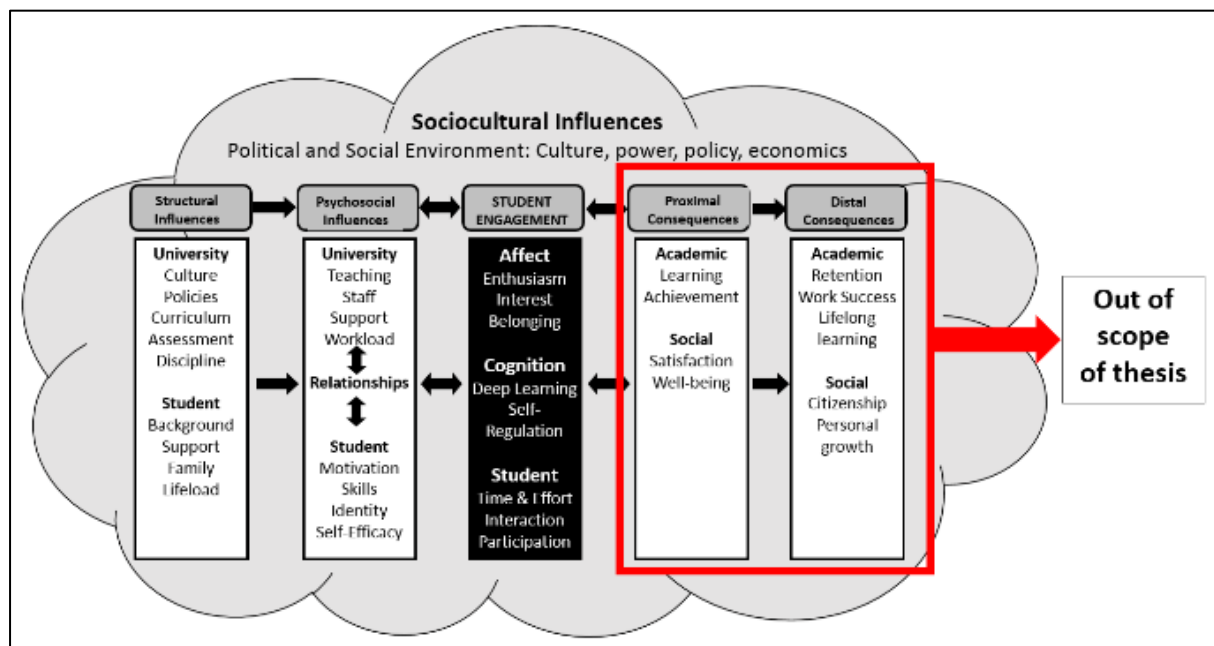
The Kahu (2013) framework provides an authentic depiction of SE and draws together the often disparate strands of SE research reported in the literature. Zhoc et al. (2016) suggest a key strength of Kahu's (2013) framework is the multi-dimensional view of SE it provides, presenting it as an individual psychosocial process that evolves over time and varies in intensity. According to Zhoc et al. (2016) the clear delineation in Kahu's (2013) framework of the state of being engaged from its antecedents and consequences, facilitates investigation into the factors that enhance or hinder SE. This delineation is particularly relevant in the present study that seeks an authentic understanding of SE.

Kahu (2013) suggests that the individual nature of SE, evident in the framework, renders ill-advisable broad generalisations of the student experience and highlights the need research focussed on narrower populations, including single institutions. The purpose of the present study is to gain an understanding of how those who teach at the organisation under study engage their students in teaching and learning, and what they believe helps or hinders them in this endeavour.

The Kahu (2013) framework simplifies what is in reality a highly complex concept, by disaggregating it into the different SE elements and further disaggregating the individual elements. This granular view of SE provides the researcher with a useful framework for analysing substantial amounts of information collected in the wide-ranging discussions SE inevitably provokes. The extensive literature review undertaken has not revealed any challenges to this view of the framework or indeed any alternative frameworks that would meet the needs of this study to the same degree. What the literature review has revealed however is that the research informing the framework, and hence the framework, do not adequately represent the voice of the tutor. By collecting data in interviews with tutors from NWU, the present study addresses this omission.

Though widely cited since its original publication up to the present day, the Kahu (2013) framework has not been empirically tested to the extent that it has in the present study. The proximal (e.g. student satisfaction, learning) and distal (e.g. work success) consequences of SE in the Kahu (2013) framework, although important in the wider SE debate, are not within the scope of this research. Figure 4 provides the analytical framework for the remainder of this thesis.

**Figure 4 Development of Conceptual Framework of this Thesis (Kahu, 2013)**



## **3 Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, I explain how I organised the research activities to achieve my research aims. I begin by explaining my interpretivist philosophical approach and my reasons for adopting a social constructionist epistemological and ontological stance. I then provide my rationale for the adoption of a qualitative methodology explaining what this entails. Next, I explain the qualitative case study strategy and provide a rationale for its adoption, outlining what this entailed. I go on explain why I chose to collect qualitative data through semi-structured interviews and how I prepared and thematically analysed the data collected. Finally, I present my ethical considerations and potential limitations of my research approaches.

### **3.2 Research questions**

My aim in this study was to enhance the understanding of student engagement in UKHE through the addition of the tutor voice, which is underrepresented in the SE discourse. Tutor understanding and interpretations of SE, influence their teaching strategies, and the design and delivery of their teaching and learning resources. The spirit in which these teaching and learning strategies and resources are received by students is reflected in the feedback collected by the institution and by Government agencies and other organisations. Student feedback collected outside the institution often informs publically available HEI league tables. The enhanced SE understanding this research seeks to deliver is therefore relevant to a range of SE stakeholders including students, tutors, HEIs and other external agencies.

Clear and explicitly formulated research questions are decisive for the success of a project (Flick 2007) and central in qualitative research according to Creswell (2007). The primary aim of this study is to understand how tutors themselves understand SE. To address this, the following research questions were formulated:

- 1 How do tutors perceive SE?
- 2 What do tutors perceive to be SE drivers and barriers?
- 3 To what extent is the tutor voice represented in the SE discourse?

### **3.3 Research approach**

My choice of interpretivist research philosophy was informed my desire for a richer understanding of tutor interpretations of student engagement in higher education and the

strategies they adopt in their teaching to encourage SE and to overcome barriers to SE. The expected outcome of this research is the co-construction of contextual knowledge based on the perceptions of the individual respondents (Willis, 2007) rather than the discovery of absolute truths, or a set of universal rules or parameters.

Interpretivist research is evident in the student engagement and more general education literature (see for example Kahu 2011 and 2014; Koskina 2011; Hulme et al 2013; van der Meer 2011; Vuori 2014). Interpretivism is a subjectivist philosophy that differentiates between physical phenomena and human beings that create meaning (Saunders et al 2016). The study of 'man-made' meanings facilitates a richer understanding of realities such as the context for this research that is UKHE and NWU. This requires alternative research approaches to those of a more scientific nature employed in positivist research (Saunders et al 2016). Acceptable knowledge according to the positivist doctrine constitutes observable and measureable facts generated through scientific method and free from human interpretation or bias (Saunders et al 2016). Although the impartial observation and measurement of particular engagement related behaviours is possible, for example attendance at taught sessions and submission of assessments, these are potential aspects of a more complex phenomenon defined by human interpretation. The emotional and cognitive aspects of engagement would present complex challenges in any attempts at impartial observation at measurement.

Ontological assumptions indicate the researcher's views on *"the nature of the social world and the way in which it might be investigated"* (Burrell and Morgan, 1979:10). Interpretivist research requires a subjective ontology such as the social constructionist ontology I adopted in this research. From a social constructionist perspective *"everyday life presents itself as a reality interpreted by men and subjectively meaningful to them as a coherent world"* (Berger and Luckmann, 1966:33) therefore an understanding of the *"complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it"* (Schwandt, 1998:118) is essential. Whilst 10 years teaching at NWU has shaped my understanding of the research context, I also needed to explain through the articulation of common forms of understanding, the processes through which the participating tutors either accounted for, explained or described their version of this reality (Gergen, March 1985).



Epistemology, the theory of knowledge, is according to Johnson and Duberley (2013:2-3) *“the study of the criteria by which we can know what does and does not constitute warranted, or scientific, knowledge”*. Epistemological assumptions indicate the researcher’s views on how we know what we know, and our justification for believing what we believe, in particular the standards of evidence we have used in our search for truths about the world and human experience (Audi, 2011). Human beings construct knowledge through group or social processes (Willis, 2007) rather than discover knowledge, making sense of their experience through the invention of concepts and models that they continually test and modify in light of new experiences (Schwandt, 2000). Inherent in this study is an epistemic claim that the tutors’ conception of engagement is socially constructed. Engagement is an ‘idea’ rather than an object that exists in a particular social setting. Therefore, and drawing on Hacking’s (1999) thoughts on the social construction of ideas (or concepts or theories), engagement need not have existed; need not be at all as it is at present; is not determined by the nature of things; is not inevitable. The implications of this are that representations of an abstract concept such as engagement are contingent upon specific social events and arrangements (Diaz-Leon, 2013). Any changes in those social events and arrangements lead to changes in the way engagement is instantiated (Hacking, 1999).

According to Sveinsdottir (2015), epistemic access to engagement somehow involves social practices. Knowledge creation or meaning making is a group process involving the shared language and understanding of group members. In this research context, knowledge was co-created by the researcher and the researched through researcher and researched interactions and their individual constructed realities. Berger and Luckmann (1966) refer to a ‘social stock of knowledge’ about everyday life that one shares in varying degrees in interactions with other individuals. Reality, or everyday life for the individual, is differentiated within this stock of knowledge by the varying degrees of relevance and familiarity of the information. Information pertaining to the sectors of everyday life with which one frequently deals, one’s profession for example, is more complex and detailed than information pertaining to more remote sectors for example other professions. There is also information in the social stock of knowledge that for a variety of reasons one cannot know and information that one will never need to know. What is important however is that one knows how this information is distributed should one need access to it.

For illustrative purposes, let us assume that information relating to the engagement concept is contained within the teaching profession stock of knowledge and therefore accessible to the tutors within NWU. It seems reasonable to suggest that the varying definitions of engagement evident in the literature reflect the social context in which the research underpinning these definitions was undertaken. Similarly, the engagement related views of individual NWU tutors with whom I share everyday life, are likely to be influenced by their experiences in other contexts. I for example have taught in a number of educational institutions and my views on engagement, which are influenced by these experiences, do not necessarily reflect entirely those set out or implied in NWU policies and practices. My views on engagement are reflected in the teaching strategies I employ and the teaching resources I develop and deliver. These are in turn adjusted according to the engagement behaviours evident in the different cohorts I teach. My engagement related experiences and those of my colleagues are fed back through informal and formal channels into the stock of knowledge that we share. The literature review presented above indicates that the meaning and understanding of student engagement, as any other concept produced through social interaction is in a constant state of revision according to both time and place (Bryman and Bell, 2007).

The intended outcome of this research was not the discovery of absolute truths but a credible and convincing (rather than definitive) understanding of how SE is constructed through the use of language and everyday interactions between people and the social practices they engage in. This understanding will contribute to and enhance the current SE discourse and, if the arguments presented are sufficiently convincing, generate real debate leading where appropriate to change (Andrews, 2012).

Relevant to this research is Gergen's (2015) distinction between organisational 'master narratives' constructed by the management of an organisation, and 'local narratives' constructed by groups within the organisation. The sometimes limited success of master narratives in uniting an organisation is often due to the local or counter narratives functioning in opposition to them (Gergen, 2015). The research considered whether this is the case for engagement related narratives at NWU.

The philosophical position of the researcher, which is evident in their ontological and epistemological assumptions, influences the design of their research (Easterby-Smith et al. 2015) including their approach to theory development, their research methods and the strategies and techniques they employ when collecting and analysing their data (Mack, 2010). These matters are now discussed.

### **3.4 Theory development**

The role of the researcher is to draw inferences from the data collected. The nature of the inferences drawn is representative of the researcher's approach to theory development. Approaches to development of theory can be deductive, inductive or abductive. Although descriptions of these approaches are nuanced (see for example Bryman and Bell (2007); Saunders et al (2016); Blaikie (2010)) there is general agreement on the nature of each approach and the type of research each approach is relevant to.

A deductive approach is relevant when the aim of the (typically positivist) research is theory falsification or verification. An inductive (typically grounded theory) approach is relevant when the aim of the research is theory generation and building; an abductive approach is relevant when the research involves the generation of new or modification of existing theory. The purpose of this research was to establish whether existing SE theory would need modifying to accommodate the tutor understandings and interpretations of SE evident in the interview data. My approach to theory development in the research was therefore abductive.

### **3.5 Research method**

Research methods are generally classified as quantitative, qualitative or a combination of both referred to as mixed methods. The distinction between quantitative/qualitative is based on the nature of the associated research data. In simple terms, quantitative data is numeric data i.e. numbers, and qualitative data is non-numeric for example words, images, video clips etc. There is a tendency in the research methods literature to prescribe research methodologies for particular philosophical positions. A quantitative methodology is generally associated with positivist research and a qualitative methodology with interpretivist research. However, there is also acknowledgement that many research project method and technique combinations may be atypical but are capable of achieving the research aims.

As I was seeking to understand the lived experience of individuals within the research context, the sharing of individual thoughts and experiences in interviews was more appropriate than a survey approach. I embarked upon this research armed with my own teaching and learning experience and some theoretical knowledge drawn from my limited reading up to that point (rather than the *tabula rasa* of the grounded theorist). I felt that this did not provide me with for example a definitive list of SE drivers that I could quantitatively test. Informal conversations with academic colleagues during the time I was mentally formulating my research questions suggested a rich vein of information I was eager to explore. The methodological choice in this research was qualitative.

The nature of the chosen research strategy is determined by the research methodology and by definition, the type of data required to be collected. These matters are now discussed.

### **3.6 Research strategy – case study**

In this research, I wanted to understand how my colleagues perceived and managed SE and whether this reflected the SE understanding and practice espoused by the institution. I was also interested to know whether my colleagues were familiar with the contemporary SE related research that I had been reviewing. I was able to access the student feedback my colleagues had received and was familiar in some cases with the anecdotal teaching reputation colleagues had acquired. I wanted to know about their teaching practice and the basis on which it was founded. As Willis (2007:240) suggests, “human behaviour is best understood as lived experience in the social context”. By adopting a case study strategy I was able to examine empirically SE through the collection of rich and detailed data in an authentic setting and to gain an understanding of “how behaviour and/or processes are influenced by, and influence context” (Hartley, 2011:323).

As with other research related aspects, locating a coherent explanation of the meaning and nature of the case study proved challenging. As Gerring (2004) proclaims, the term “case study” is a “definitional morass” (p342). Yin (2014) describes the case study as a detailed inquiry into a phenomenon or topic (SE for example) in its real-life setting (NWU for example). Gerring (2004) describes it as the intensive study of a single unit (NWU) with the aim of generalising the (SE related) findings across a larger set of units (other universities).

Case study strategies can involve a single or multiple cases. A multiple-case study, using methods that are identical, involves what Bryman and Bell (2007) refer to as a comparative design approach. According to these authors, the logic of comparison embedded in the comparative design approach implies that a social phenomenon, SE for example, is better understood when compared in relation to multiple meaningfully comparable cases; NWU and its nearest competitor(s) for example. My teaching experience and preliminary research suggested the current teaching institution was but one of many influences on a tutor's understanding and management of SE. The data collected suggests this was a reasonable decision. NWU provided a single bounded entity (Cresswell 1994 in Blaikie, 2010) and the means of keeping together the 'characteristics' I wished to study (Goode and Hatt 1952 in Blaikie, 2010), in essence the tutors.

A key aspect of case study research is the focus of the research questions and the source of the required data, collectively termed the 'unit of analysis' (Blaikie 2010). There are generally fewer units of analysis in a case study than there are for example in a survey, however the depth of the investigation is considerable (Hammersley 1992 in Blaikie, 2010). Whilst NWU provided the context for the research, the sources of my data and therefore my units of analysis were the tutors. In Yin's (2009) terms, I adopted a single-case study strategy with an embedded case-study design involving multiple units of analysis.

Gerring (2004:341) suggests the case study is "often practiced but little understood". It is also one of the most criticized forms of social science research (Willis, 2007). The case study strategy is in common use in educational research (Yin, 2009) and can involve qualitative data only, quantitative only, or both (Yin, 1984 in Eisenhardt, 1989). It has been suggested that the case study strategy is too situation specific (Weick, 1969) and provides little basis (Yin, 1994) for scientific generalization. According to Gerring (2004), all other things being equal, the case study is useful for forming descriptive inferences.

Different authors propose different types or categories of case study. For example, Willis (2007) categorises case studies as either descriptive or interpretive, according to the way the data are used. Descriptive case studies provide a rich and detailed description of a case without developing theory as the case progresses; the interpretive case study uses the analyses of the thick data sources collected to either challenge, support or illustrate the

theoretical assumptions held before the data was gathered, or to develop conceptual categories. The local understanding acquired in the interpretive case study may be related to prevailing models and/or theories (Willis 2007). Stake's (1995) 'intrinsic' case study is similar to the approach described by Willis's (2007) interpretive case study in that it aims through a detailed investigation and analysis of a single or multiple cases to provide insight and advance understanding on an issue, and to refine existing theory where appropriate. Willis's (2007) interpretive case study approach more closely reflects the approach I adopted in this research.

Whilst the focus on NWU might suggest an intrinsic enquiry, the quest for a broader understanding of the SE concept is addressed by the involvement of 20 NWU tutors, justifying the researcher's claims of a more instrumental or arguably collective case study approach. The interviewee's responses are informed by their experiences at NWU and other institutions they have been involved in as a students and/or tutors, the cohorts past and present that they have taught and, in some instances, the educational research they have undertaken. Whether NWU is a typical case is a moot point given breadth of informing experience across the sample and the absence in this study of a researcher desire for 'grand generalizations' (Stake, 1995).

### **3.7 Data collection – semi-structured Interviews**

Although any data collection method can be used in case-study research (Goode and Hatt 1952 in Blaikie, 2010) the interview is a popular method of choice (Silverman, 2011) and the method used in this research. There are various forms of research interview including structured, semi-structured and unstructured, the latter is sometimes referred to as open or in-depth (Saunders et al, 2016; Silverman, 2011). Each form requires a particular approach that is indicative of the philosophy, purpose and style of the research (Saunders et al, 2016). I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews, which accommodated a subjective interpretivist approach. In this form, the interview would provide me with access to individuals' understandings, experiences and opinions (Byrne 2004 in Silverman, 2006) of SE. These would not necessarily be observable or accommodated in more objective approaches such as the structured interview or survey-based approaches, which according to Saunders et al (2016) seeks factual information from witnesses to a reality that exists independently of them. I wanted to understand the socially constructed reality of the tutors that I interviewed,

and to actively engage with them in the co-construction of meaning (Silverman, 2006) related to SE. For example, exploring how they interpreted SE and on what experience this interpretation was based. In addition, how they understood the interpretation and treatment of SE and its influence on tutors.

Although it is conceivable that researchers might adapt theoretical concepts and approaches to accommodate their operational requirements, familiarity with the acknowledged approach and content of the different interview formats was an important starting point for me in designing my research. According to Saunders et al (2016): Structured interview questions are pre-determined and standardized. Each interviewee is asked the same set of questions and the interviewer records pre-coded answers and the data produced are quantifiable. In semi-structured interviews, the interviewer works with a key set of questions or themes that may vary between interviews in order or content and the data produced are qualitative. In unstructured, in-depth or open interviews, the aspects of the area of interest that need exploring are clear to the interviewer but there is no pre-determined list of questions. Again, the data produced are qualitative.

Semi-structured interviews were selected for the following reasons. There were four clearly defined questions that I was seeking answers to and I wanted to engage each tutor in a conversation where I could probe for more detail where I felt necessary on the answers they gave.

The interview questions were:

1. *What is student engagement?*
2. *What drives student engagement?*
3. *What presents barriers to student engagement?*

used the same four questions to guide the interviews I conducted. To preserve the anonymity of colleagues I refer to them in this thesis as 'Tn'; 'T' representing Tutor and 'n' representing the order (1-20) in which the interviews were conducted. I was interested to establish whether the lack of clarity around the meaning of SE that I had observed in the literature and experienced at the institution was apparent amongst my colleagues. I wanted to know what my colleagues believed were the drivers and barriers of student engagement. Did my

colleagues' beliefs contradict anything suggested in the literature or by the institution? What was the experience and evidence on which their beliefs were based?

The availability of the original recording of the interview means that any ambiguity of meaning or inconsistencies can be clarified without the need to contact the participant concerned (Fasick, 2001 in Halcomb and Davidson 2006). I believed a further advantage of recording the interviews was that I would be able to concentrate on the conversation rather than worrying about notetaking, which would put me at risk of missing valuable contributions. At the start of each interview I obtained the interviewee's consent to record the interviews using "Dictaphone", a free to download iPhone audio-recording application recommended to me by a fellow doctoral student. Each interview lasted between fifty minutes and two hours.

I began each interview by summarising the information in the participant information sheet (see appendix), confirming that the interviewee was happy for me to record our exchanges and then posing the first interview question; what is student engagement? As suggested by Bryman and Bell (2007) the direction the conversation was taking determined the order in which I posed the remaining questions, allowing the tutors to reply as they chose. Additional spur of the moment questions prompted by interviewee responses, if appropriate (Gummesson, 2000) were also posed. I did not add the spur of the moment questions to the list of questions for subsequent interviews because I did not want to prompt the interviewees for information. I did probe where points were unclear or warranted elaboration.

Silvermann (2011) notes that each form of interview requires a particular skill set in order to achieve the rich data sought. The skill set required by the semi-structured interviewer includes an understanding of the aims of the project, a rapport with each interviewee and probing skills. I had personally established the aims of the project and had previously conducted semi-structured interviews so felt equipped with the necessary interviewing skills. Recording the interviews (discussed in more detail below) alleviated some of the concerns I had about capturing the richness in the conversations. I offered the tutors my office or an alternative venue of their choice for the interview. I conducted fifteen interviews in my office, three in the tutor's office, one in the tutor's home and another in a quiet private corner of a local café. Written consent for the interview to be recorded was obtained from all interviewees prior to the interview. None of the interviewees wanted to check the interview



transcripts I produced but the large majority said they would be interested in findings of the research.

As the interviews progressed, I did consider including a number of focus-group sessions that I felt would allow me to increase the number of colleagues contributions captured within a shorter timeframe. I was however unsure of how I would cope as a novice focus group facilitator and did not have time to develop these skills. I was also conducting and transcribing interviews concurrently and decided I did not want to risk losing the identity of individual contributors in the transcription process that was already proving to be more difficult and time consuming than I had anticipated.

Establishing a rapport with each of the interviewees and interviewing one's colleagues presented interesting matters for me to grapple with. These matters are now considered.

### **3.8 Interviewing peers - Insider research**

The assumption evident in the literature that the researcher and respondents are unknown to each other rather than colleagues (Platt, 1981) did not apply in this research. The research undertaken is more accurately described as 'Insider research', which is *"the study of one's own social group or society"* (Greene 2014:1), *"not the strange but the familiar"* (Mercer, 2007:4). Insider research has a long history in educational establishments (Humphrey, 2012), is used by increasing numbers of educational researchers (Mercer, 2007) and yet the associated issues appear to be under-researched (Humphrey, 2012; Mercer, 2007). According to Mercer (2007:2), there is a tendency in the research methods literature to *"gloss over the intricacies of insider research conducted at one's place of work"*. Although the power imbalance between the researcher and researched often favours the researcher (Bryman and Bell, 2007, Wiles et al. 2004), I do not believe this was the case in my study.

I interviewed 7 Principal Lecturers and 13 Senior Lecturers. Principal and Senior Lecturers at the institution have a mixture of teaching and unit leadership responsibilities. Principal Lecturers have additional programme management responsibilities that do not involve people management responsibilities. Throughout the time I was conducting the interviews, I was the Principal Lecturer responsible for the BA (Hons) International Business Management programme, the Unit Leader on a core first year unit on this programme and a member of the

teaching team of a core second year unit on the BA (Hons) Business Management programme. With few exceptions, the interviewees were aware of my doctoral research focus before they received my participant information sheet. Sixteen of the twenty colleagues I interviewed either had or were studying for a doctoral qualification. Because of this, the feelings of empathy and support from those colleagues were almost palpable.

The potential for the interview to have longer-term consequences that the researcher would need to live with (Platt, 1981) needed to be considered. I did not believe that I was asking the tutors to divulge information with the potential to damage them personally or anyone else. They each signed the form consenting for me to report their anonymised contributions suggesting they shared my beliefs. However, I do believe there is always a chance that indiscretions will be committed during interviews held in an apparently safe and informal settings.

Although student engagement is a complex phenomenon that my colleagues and I grapple with on a day-to-day basis it is not what I believe can be described as delicate or sensitive. I did not at any point in the interviews feel the need for conscious acts of role-playing to overcome the difficulties of probing delicate areas (Platt, 1981:78). The interviews I conducted as an insider educator-researcher are adequately described by Humphry (2012) as a shared discourse of professional pedagogy and practice in which the collegiate conversation generated moves back and forth between first-order descriptions and second-order analyses as SE related knowledge is co-constructed.

### **3.9 My role in the data collection**

At the beginning of this study, I wanted to ensure that my voice had an equal hearing to those of my interviewees. If, as I hoped, my findings were to influence future policy and procedure development within my employing institution, then I wanted my voice to be audible within my findings. A colleague suggested I could achieve this by conducting a self-interview and so with limited further thought I included this intention in my research proposal. Subsequent research revealed that the participant self-interview is a data collection method involving one recording through computer-assisted or audio-recording means, one's own, often anonymous contributions. Participant self-interviews are employed in medical science (see for example Griffie et al 2016) and various disciplines within the social sciences (see Keightley

et al 2012). In contrast the researcher self-interview is associated in the literature with the constant comparison method employed within grounded theory. According to Fernandez (2005), the constant comparative method seeks to reduce the risk of bias-induced distortions in the study by forcing the researcher to state their knowledge and assumptions as data in the form of memos or self-interviews and to compare these data with other data from the study.

I decided not to self-interview in this study. The association of the researcher self-interview with grounded theory was not the reason for this decision. I had planned to self-interview at the time I was ready but had not started to begin collecting my data. When I reached this point I felt the detailed knowledge and understanding of the SE literature I had acquired and the consequent influences on my own perceptions of SE placed me in what felt was an unequal position vis a vis my colleagues. In some ways, I regret not self-interviewing early on in the process because it would have provided me with a baseline for measuring the knowledge and understanding of SE I had acquired in this research. It would also provide justification for my belief that tutors need information about contemporary approaches in teaching and learning aimed at encouraging SE. Although this is acquirable through the tutor's own research endeavours, given their other competing priorities, for convenience it should be acquired through institutionally provided and timetabled CPD sessions.

Although I discuss the transcription and analysis of the interview data further on in the thesis, it is appropriate to state at this point that all of my contributions in the interviews are clearly identifiable in the transcripts and disregarded throughout the analysis. Also disregarded in the analysis were a small number of tutor comments evidently prompted by my input, for example;

*Me: so we've established then it isn't attendance although that is a level of engagement.*

*P14: I think a bit like you're saying there's levels of it and I think there can be different triggers that might drive better attendance.*

If unlike the P14 example, the tutor continued after my comment to develop the point according to their own thinking then I considered in the analysis the contribution concerned, for example;

*Me: Do you think that's down to ability or personality or.....*

*P20: I don't think it's down to ability. I'm not convinced it's ability. I think it's a confidence factor and again.....*

### **3.10 Sampling**

Sampling is “the selection of specific data sources from which data are collected to address the research objectives” (Gentles et al. 2015). This definition synthesises and simplifies the subtle inconsistencies, ambiguities and incomplete descriptions evident in the sampling literature (Gentles et al. 2015; Patton, 1990). As this statement suggests, it is necessary to explain the terms and concepts featured in my explanation of my approach to sampling in this study. I begin with ‘population’ and ‘sample’ defined respectively by Blaikie (2010:172) as *“an aggregate of all cases that confirm to some designated set of criteria”* and *“a selection of elements (members or units) from a population [which] may be used to make statements about the whole population”*. In this study, there were arguably two populations from which I chose my samples. The members of the first population were all of the universities in the UK. The members of the second population were all of the academic tutors employed by the university eventually selected from the first population.

In qualitative research such as this research, sample size and sample selection techniques are important because they inform judgements on the rigour and credibility of the research findings. I now explain my choice of sample selection technique and provide a justification for the number in my chosen sample.

### **3.11 Sampling strategy**

The techniques used to select the sample, or units of analysis (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2007) are referred to as the sampling strategy (Patton 1990), method (Blaikie 2010), scheme (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2007), or approach (Sandelowski 1995). The sampling strategy determines the conclusions that can be drawn from the research (Blaikie, 2010). In qualitative research participants should be those more likely to provide the rich and detailed research question related information the researcher needs to produce a persuasive account of the phenomenon they are studying (Curtis et al. 2000, Walsh and Downe 2006 in Cleary et al 2014).

A range of similar sampling strategy options are presented in the literature under different labels, complicating the task of making my choices “as public and replicable as possible” (Denzin, 1978, p. 7) in order to demonstrate the rigor in my research. According to Patton (1990) because the focus of qualitative inquiry is typically in-depth on relatively small and sometimes single cases, it is important that the case(s) (or sample(s)) selection is purposeful. Purposeful sampling as the label suggests involves the selection of information-rich cases “from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (Patton 1990:169). I selected my sampling strategies with these objectives in mind.

I had in effect to choose two sampling strategies; one for the choice of University that would provide the research context; the other for the tutors, my primary data source. Although Bryman and Bell (2007:424) suggest, “a case study is not a sample of one drawn from a known population” I feel my choice of NWU, my employer, requires some justification. For me NWU was a critical case that I had come to know well and had unlimited and broadly unfettered access to as a student and tutor. NWU would as Patton (1990:174) suggests, “*yield the most information and have the greatest impact on the development of knowledge*”. NWU provided a single bounded entity (Cresswell 1994 in Blaikie, 2010) where all of the tutors I wished to study could be located.

Although NWU was convenient from a logistical perspective, it is important to reiterate that tutor SE understanding and perspectives are informed by their teaching and learning experiences as tutor and student at their current and previous institutions. NWU provided the context (and in some instances one of the contexts) in which the tutors’ current teaching was practiced, but was only part of their story.

Marshall’s (1996) ‘purposive sampling’ best describes the sampling strategy I adopted when putting together the list of tutors I planned to invite for interview. I also had some selection criteria that I have explained below but this was not sufficiently formal for me to claim the adoption of a criterion sampling strategy (Patton 1990). Purposive sampling according to Marshall (1996) is a commonly used technique where the researcher actively selects who they consider the most productive sample to answer the research questions. The objective is to

collect sufficient depth of information to fully address the research objectives rather than to identify a specific number of interviewees (Marshall 1996).

I had been reflecting since the start of the study on who would be the most productive and interesting participants. I was keen to speak to tutors of varying lengths of teaching experience, currently involved in teaching and research across a range of disciplines and the years of the programmes. I was mindful of exceptional teaching reputations that were informed by student feedback but did not investigate this in any detail prior to selection. There is an unintended almost even male (9), female (11) representation in the sample. There is an unintended senior lecturer (13), principal lecturer (7) representation in the sample, which reflects to some degree the representation of these roles in the institution. I did not ask to participants to divulge their age however I respectfully estimate a reasonably even representation within the sample of the following age ranges: below 40 (8); 40-49 (6); above 50 (6). Although I had the majority of the sample confirmed in my mind before I began collecting data, I approached the names on the list when I was in a position to interview them. This was a risky strategy but thankfully, it did not present me with any issues. The working environment at NWU is sufficiently flexible and the mutual support for research amongst colleagues such that scheduling a 90-minute interview outside the participant's teaching hours did not present any significant problems. It transpired that I found myself in the fortunate position of having more tutors prepared to participate than I needed with only one tutor unable to fulfil their commitment to participate. None of the participants withdrew their information after the study was completed.

Patton (1990) contrasts purposeful sampling strategies, which are often dependent on some knowledge of the research context, with opportunistic sampling strategies that exploit opportunities as and when they arise. Although I would describe my tutor selection as broadly purposeful, in the interests of the openness and transparency I declared my weddedness to above, I confess that I did opportunistically invite two tutors to participate in the research. A chance conversation, some element of which at that time would invariably be directed at my research, indicated each tutor had a particular interest in SE.

### 3.11.1 Sample size

An adequate sample size is one that sufficiently answers the research question (Marshall, 1996) and links the data sources to the wider population from which they were chosen. In keeping with the traditional aims of qualitative research, my aim was to explore rather than to count differing opinions and representations (Gaskell 2000 in O'Reilly and Parker, 2012) of SE. Sampling was therefore concerned with richness of information (Kuzel 1992 in O'Reilly and Parker, 2012), appropriateness and adequacy (Morse and Field 1995 in O'Reilly and Parker, 2012).

I wanted to ensure that the size of my sample enhanced rather than compromised judgements of the quality of my research. The sampling literature had left me feeling more confused than enlightened. The importance attributed to sample size was contradictory with some suggesting it was not an issue in qualitative research (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2005) and others reporting the apparent misconception that the adequacy of a qualitative research sampling strategy is unrelated to sample size (Sandelowski 1995). Patton (1990:185) suggested, *"The validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information-richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than with sample size."* Body's (2016) synthesis of the relevant literature concludes that from a theoretical standpoint, *"the research philosophy or paradigm adopted and discussions of an appropriate sample size are related"* (p428).

Theoretical saturation determined the size of my sample. Theoretical saturation is the point when no new insights are obtained, no new themes are identified (Strauss and Corbin 1990 in Bowen, 2008), effectively when nothing new is being added (Bowen, 2008). There were from the second interview onwards, similar themes evident. Around the 16<sup>th</sup> interview, I noted the repetition of key themes such as the impact of class size, class attendance, the student-tutor relationship on student engagement although the supporting evidence and examples were different. I was apprehensive about declaring theoretical saturation too early so I decided to continue interviewing the colleagues with who I had arrangements in place, eventually conducting in total 20 interviews. It is suggested that there will always be new things to discover and data are never truly saturated (Wray et al, 2007 in O'Reilly and Parker,

2012). In this study however, I drew reassurance from being unable to identify any new substantive themes or insights in the last three interviews I conducted. This suggested to me there was perhaps some value in Mason's (2002) warning that more data does not necessarily lead to more information.

### **3.12 Data Analysis**

The data collected during the twenty interviews conducted, an estimated 250,000 words, provided an 'attractive nuisance' (Miles, 1979); rich in content and relevance but problematic in terms of volume and how to analyse it in a timely and effective manner. The research tool I chose to analyse the data collected was thematic analysis, which, with limited adaptation is appropriate for a range of ontological and epistemological approaches (Braun and Clarke, 2006) including the social constructionist/interpretivist approach adopted in this research. There is no apparent agreement on the nature (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2006) or use (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Boyatzis, 1998; Tuckett, 2004) of thematic analysis. Although thematic analysis facilitates the development of theory from raw information gathered for the research (Boyatzis 1998), according to Bryman and Bell (2007:637) "the criteria employed in the identification of themes are often unclear". Braun and Clarke (2006) however provide a detailed yet succinct and clear explanation of the phases within the process (see below) which I had observed in a number of journal articles and PhD theses in various disciplines including education, psychology, nursing and business. I already had some experience of using thematic analysis in two previous research projects and felt that I possessed sufficient competence in 'pattern recognition' (Boyatzis, 1998), the ability to recognise what is important and to give it meaning (Strauss and Corbin 1990), and the ability to cluster themes.

There are six phases to thematic analysis summarised in Table 5, and described and applied in the context of my research below. Braun and Clarke (2006) caution that although the six steps they have identified suggest a linear process, in practice it is necessarily recursive, and this reflects my experience. Throughout the analysis process and during the production of the report I was referring back to recordings occasionally, transcripts, codes and themes often. It was as Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested a lengthy process and in my mind, one that never felt complete. I was however comforted by their warning that "*coding data and generating*



*themes could go on ad infinitum.....it is impossible to provide clear guidelines on when to stop, but when your refinements are not adding anything substantial, stop!” (p92).*

**Table 4 Phases of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006)**

Phase		Description of the process
1	Familiarising yourself with your data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2	Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3	Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4	Reviewing themes:	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis.
5	Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6	Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

I made use of the Computer Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) NVivo 10 (referred to hereafter as NVivo) when generating my initial codes (Stage 2), searching for themes (Stage 3) and reviewing themes (Stage 4). NVivo is a widely used and supports a number of forms of data analyses including for example ‘constant-comparison’, a common form of analyses undertaken by qualitative researchers (Leech 2004). Although NVivo is intended to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of learning from data (Bazeley 2007), Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2011:13) note, “CAQDAS programmes can help researchers to analyse data but cannot analyse the data for researchers”. Glaser (1998, pp. 185-6) warns against the ‘technological traps’ of data analysis tools, a hindrance rather than an aid to creativity, that can inhibit the researcher’s skills development and for which there is often a time-consuming learning curve. I discuss below the mixed benefits I gained at each stage of the process from using NVivo.

### **3.12.1 Phase 1 thematic analysis: familiarising yourself with your data:**

Phase 1 of the thematic analysis involves the researcher familiarising themselves with their data through reading and re-reading and handwritten material, or listening to repeatedly in addition to or instead of transcribing any recorded material. Throughout the familiarisation process, Braun and Clarke (2006) encourage the researcher to note down any ideas or thoughts for reference in future stages.

The importance of a detailed knowledge of the research data in prompting the identification of recurring themes, patterns and meaning is widely recognised (Saunders et al 2016; Braun and Clarke, 2006; Boyatzis, 1998). Transcription is one way of developing this familiarity and should according to Bird (2005:227) be “a key phase of data analysis within interpretive qualitative methodology”. The lengthy process of transcribing the interviews from the audio recordings afforded me the opportunity to immerse myself in my data and thus to begin the familiarisation process.

I produced a verbatim transcription (that is to say, an exact word-for-word replication of the Audio-recorded words (Poland, 1995 in Halcomb and Davidson 2006)) for each interview because I did not want to risk missing anything out that might eventually prove useful in my analysis. I also believed this approach would enhance the transparency and auditability of my research. It took me between 60-90 minutes to transcribe 10 minutes of audio recording depending on the clarity of the recording and the tutor’s articulation style. This corresponds with Britten’s (1995 in Halcomb and Davidson 2006) estimate of 6–7 hours of transcription for every hour of recording. A number of colleagues suggested that paying someone else to transcribe the interviews would save me a substantial amount of time. This was of course true, however I would not have been able to immerse myself in my data to the extent that I did or to be as familiar with my data as I was at the end of the transcription process. During transcription, my determination to represent as accurately as possible the conversations that occurred led me to develop certain annotation conventions. I noted in subsequent reading of the literature during write-up that the use of such conventions was not unusual and evident in conversation and discourse analysis transcription (Bird, 2005). I indicated participant pauses using repeated full stops and enclosed largely inaudible or potentially inaccurate words in square brackets. Emboldened text indicated a strong emphasis and finally my

contributions to the conversation, in addition to adopting all of the previously stated conventions were presented in red text.

Heritage (1984) suggests that transcription corrects limitations of memory, permitting more thorough and repeated examination of conversations. I had suspected during and after many of the interviews, that I had missed some of the detail in some of the exchanges. Listening again to the interviews I often felt as if I was hearing the conversation for the first time. This highlighted to me the value of both recording and transcribing the interviews myself. My consequent ability to recall during the data analysis specific tutor comments in context was particularly helpful.

Transcribing an interview soon after it was conducted allowed me time to review and amend where necessary my interview technique and then in subsequent interviews to monitor whether the changes I had made were working. I noticed for example in the early interviews that my instinctive utterances of agreement (Mmm....yes, yes..... etc.) was at times obscuring the interviewee's concurrent conversation, which made the transcription more difficult and frustrating. In subsequent interviews, I remained silent, which did initially feel rather unnatural, and instead, smiled or gestured discretely. I also noticed on one or two occasions that an account of an incident I was aware of was different to the account I had heard. Listening to the interview recordings, I felt I had given inappropriate 'signals' to this effect. In subsequent interviews, I remained silent and offered no judgements on such matters. I also made better use of silence as the interviews progressed, allowing the interviewees to respond unprompted to my questions.

### **3.12.2 Phase 2 thematic analysis: generating initial codes:**

In this phase of the thematic analysis, initial codes are produced from the data. These are words or phrases in the data that are seen as potentially meaningful to the phenomenon (Boyatzis, 1998) which in my research was SE. According to Braun and Clarke (2006) amongst many others, the initial codes generated in thematic analysis can be theory-driven, that is to say 'a priori' codes 'derived from existing theory and literature' (Saunders et al 2016:583), or data-driven, that is to say 'derived from data by the researcher' (Saunders et al 2016:583).

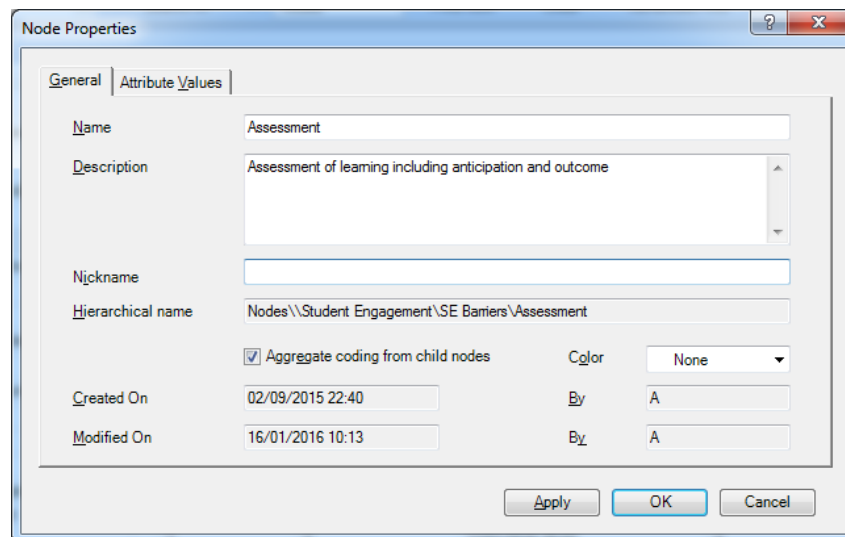
It was in phase 2 of the analysis that I began using NVivo. Whilst the intention here is not to provide guidance on the use of NVivo I do explain broadly how I made use of NVivo in my data analysis, the benefits I accrued from its use and the obstacles I faced as a result of its use.

An NVivo 'Project' has a default hierarchical folder structure that includes default folders in which different categories of project information are stored. At top of the hierarchy is the project folder that I named 'Student Engagement'. Beneath the Student Engagement folder were a series of folders where the different categories of project information were stored. My Microsoft Word document formatted interview transcripts, categorised in NVivo as an NVivo-compatible internal information source containing data to be analysed, were imported into the 'Sources/Internals' sub-folder. Each initial code I created, referred to in NVivo as a 'node' and part of a parent-child node hierarchy, was stored initially in a sub-folder I had created under the parent 'Student Engagement' node folder. I first created initial code sub-folders for the each theory-driven 'a priori' code in which I could store relevant text strings from the interview transcripts, or create lower level child-node folders for associated initial codes. For example, beneath the parent node 'Student Engagement' folder I created a child node 'Student Behaviour' folder beneath which I created a child node 'Attendance' folder with the text string *"I do think attendance is a measure of engagement but I think it can also capture people who are there but not actually engaged"*.

NVivo offers a slick and efficient automated alternative to the time-consuming and often unwieldy manual initial coding process. Working between the 'Nodes' window and a window in which was displayed the interview transcript I was coding, I was able to easily create initial codes by highlighting strings of words in the interview transcript and dragging and dropping them into existing node sub-folders. A new or node sub-folder was quickly and easily at the right-click of the mouse created at the relevant parent node level within the node hierarchy. This opened a window (see Figure 5. NVivo Node Properties Window) in which information relating to the initial code (node) properties was recorded. This information is for use in the current and subsequent phases of the analysis, and in the standard NVivo project queries, models and reports.

The identification of some of the initial codes was driven by the a priori codes I had derived from the adapted Kahu (2011) framework below and other SE related theory I had read and

was by then familiar with. I derived other codes from comments in the transcripts I found interesting and relevant to SE. There was no interpretation in this phase. I simply highlighted and dragged the passage of text into a new or existing node within the node hierarchy.



**Figure 5 NVivo Node Properties Window**

To address the criticism by Bryman (1981 in Braun and Clarke 2006) that the context is often lost in coding, I retained, in some cases quite a lot of the data surrounding the comment I felt to be interesting and relevant to my research question. I noted however that it was quite easy in NVivo to construct a single search string to locate a particular word or phrase in some or all of the interview transcripts.

At the end of Stage 2, I had identified over 1800 initial codes in my interview data.

Braun and Clarke (2006) advise coding for as many themes or patterns in the data as possible. On reflection however, I feel a more disciplined approach to the initial open coding would have cut down on the time spent subsequently rationalising the codes into more substantive themes. Thinking through more thoroughly about what the participant was saying and the attribute of engagement they were actually talking about rather than just coding them under multiple nodes would have reduced the time taken to complete this stage. What the coding under multiple nodes did reveal however was that a driver of engagement could also be a barrier to engagement. For example, in relation to class size, whilst large classes present

barriers to engagement, small classes tend to drive engagement; in relation to assessment, enhanced engagement was evident in the subjects where the assessment was taking place at the expense of engagement in the subjects where it was not. My experience did bear out Braun and Clarke's (2006) claim that coding for as many themes or patterns in the data as possible would provide information that would potentially be useful at some point in the future.

### **3.12.3 Phase 3 thematic analysis: searching for themes**

Phase 3 is where the analysis begins and the focus shifts from the detailed level of the codes to the broader level of themes. All of the codes and related data extracts (quotes) are reviewed and sorted into candidate themes.

I was at first overwhelmed by the number of initial codes I had identified and uncertain that I would be able to produce a more manageable set of candidate themes. During this phase, I experienced a number of issues with NVivo, which undermined my confidence in the stability of the software and the safety of my data. I was unable to open the project on number of occasions and had to call on the NWU IT Support Team for assistance in reverting to my last backup. I also experienced some difficulties restructuring and rationalising the initial codes within the NVivo node hierarchy. These incidents informed 'crucial conversations' with myself and my decision to complete the data analysis manually. Transferring the data from NVivo to Microsoft Excel spreadsheets and Microsoft Word documents required a significant amount of time and effort that I felt at the time was an appropriate price to pay for peace of mind over the security of my data.

During this phase of the analysis my mental reflections, decisions, and revisions were extensive and once I had identified a related group of initial codes, the task of devising a succinct and meaningful candidate theme name was equally challenging. My deliverables from this phase were a set of two documents for each of my research objectives. In the first document, I listed each quote alongside the sequentially numbered candidate theme (see for example Table 5 Research objective 1 (RO1) quotes and candidate themes).

**Table 5 Research objective 1 (RO1) quotes and candidate themes**

Data Extract/Quote	Candidate Theme
Maybe all we need to be trying to look for is non-engagement rather than trying to pin down what we mean by engagement. (T4)	1 - We know what SE isn't
I think it has to happen off the bat (T15)	2 – Student must be engaged at the outset of the programme –Xferred to RO2 314
I think we know what it isn't (T15)	1 - We know what SE isn't
Coming to university is like joining the gym isn't it. You're only going to get fit if you bother to put the effort in. (T2)	3 – SE involves student active input and effort
I think that's the sad bit isn't it that in a sense I'll get the input as I think, you know, from the wise person that has given me the lecture then when it comes down to me having to engage with the material or take part in the activity, its optional. And they don't realise that's part of the pedagogic process. (T2)	3 – SE involves student active input and effort
if you're having to penalise people for not engaging then it's a shame isn't it cos in a way engagement should be a voluntary thing. (T2)	4 – SE should be voluntary
to them it's an entitlement to just pick and choose don't they, I've paid this money and therefore give me the education, rather than realising, I've paid this money, I've joined the gym and now I've got to work in the gym and their not prepared to work in the gym. (T2)	3 – SE involves student active input and effort
there isn't one form of engagement, there may be different forms of engagement (T3)	5 – SE has many forms
in terms of student engagement I think most of it has to fall on the students rather than, than the tutors. (T3)	3 – SE involves student active input and effort

I retained the participant identifier in this document so that I could more easily identify the interview transcript where I could see the quote in context. A second document featured the sequentially listed candidate themes associated with the research objective (see for example Table 6 RO1 Candidate themes).

At the end of Phase 3, I had 38 RO1, 312 RO2, and 131 RO3 candidate themes.

### **3.12.4 Phase 4 thematic analysis: reviewing themes**

In Phase 4 of the thematic analysis, the candidate themes identified in Phase 3 are reviewed and refined, leading to the production of a set of overarching themes that accurately reflect the meanings evident in the data collected (Braun and Clarke 2006). Table 7 contains the overarching themes identified for RO1.

**Table 6 RO1 Candidate themes**

1 - We know what SE isn't	20 - Students have to take responsibility for their own learning
2 - Student must be engaged at the outset of the programme	21 - different levels of SE
3 - SE involves student active input and effort	22 - SE is more than just class attendance
4 - SE should be voluntary	23 - Class attendance is an essential element of SE
5 - SE has many forms	24 - SE involves interest in studies
6 - Tutors try to get the students to engage	25 - Large classes make SE monitoring difficult
7 - SE is a stepping stone to learning	26 - Students ignore Moodle
8 - SE is individual	27 - SE is about Identity
9 - SE is not easy to define	28 - Checks required to ascertain whether each form of SE is delivering learning
10 - SE is another way of saying motivated	29 - SE nature might be discipline specific
11 - don't know what SE is	30 - SE is about student buy-in to and understanding of the discipline
12 - we don't know what students think SE is	31 - SE requires enthusiasm for the subject
13 - students and tutors understand SE differently	32 - SE requires passion for the subject
14 - SE is about more than just assessment outcomes	33 - Student's objectives determine the nature of their engagement
15 - The institution and tutors understand SE differently	34 - The university is interested in Academic Engagement
16 - Tutors should be inspirational	35 - The institution doesn't know what engagement is
17 - Tutors need to clarify their expectations of students	36 - An Institutional SE Definition is useful
18 - SE and learning takes place outside as well as inside the institution	37 - Good grades are a by-product of effective engagement
19 - SE is difficult to measure	38 - An institutional definition of engagement is difficult because it is so individual

To allow me to manipulate the candidate themes more easily I transferred them into an excel spreadsheet where I created a separate sheet for each research objective. I then systematically reviewed the candidate themes for each research objective, with a view to identifying any similar candidate themes I could group within an overarching theme. I assigned a symbol to each overarching theme (see Table 8 Sort Key for RO2 and RO3 overarching themes), and to the candidate themes I had identified as belonging to it (see Tables 9 and 10). In some instances, re-reading, and often going back to the transcript to review the quote in context led me to reassign a particular quote to another candidate theme because I had revised my assessment of its meaning and implications. The timings I had recorded throughout my transcripts allowed me to pinpoint reasonably accurately, where a particular quote appeared in the audio recording. I did not at any point however feel the



need to listen again to a particular passage in any audio recordings. I was, as a result of the transcription process, and the availability of the verbatim transcripts, familiar with the recordings to the point that I could attribute extremely accurately comments to tutors and recall comments I had not coded (within a candidate theme or at all) and the tutor who made them.

**Table 7 Phase 4: RO1 overarching themes**

1. Individual
2. Related to (subject) discipline
3. Isn't location specific
4. Meaning unclear
5. Part of a process

I identified five overarching themes amongst the 38 candidate themes for RO1. During this process, I had transferred a small number of RO1 initial codes out to other research objectives and transferred a similar number in. For RO2 and RO3 I devised a key (See Table 8) so that I could use the Excel sort facility to sort the candidate themes identified in Phase 3.

**Table 8 Sort key for RO2 and RO3 overarching themes**

Key	Overarching Theme
<input type="checkbox"/>	Teaching experienced by students
G	Government policies
O	Year of study effect
△	Student-Tutor Relationship
?	Student ability/competence
T	Tutor sentiments
U	University measures
♥	Student sentiments/emotions
↗	Student actions
L	External influences
D	Discipline
C	Student Characteristics

In some instances, (see examples in the Tables 9 and 10) I found that a candidate theme could conceivably be included in more than one overarching theme.

**Table 9 RO2 overarching theme identification**

Candidate Theme	Key (1)	Key (2)
187 - A range of (extra-)curricular teaching activities are required to cater for different learning styles	<input type="checkbox"/>	
188 – Students learn by finding the solutions rather than being presented with the solutions	↗	<input type="checkbox"/>
189 – multiple summative assessment tasks over a period of time have been trialled in an effort to encourage continuous engagement	<input type="checkbox"/>	
190 - Students need to be shown what they will get in Levels 5 & 6	○	
191 - Students need to be supported in their transitions to Levels 5 & 6	♥	○
192 – Student mentors can explain to students what they can expect in each academic year	○	

**Table 10 RO3 overarching theme identification**

Candidate Theme	Key (1)	Key (2)
1 – Preparatory work must be appropriate	<input type="checkbox"/>	
2 – enrolling on the wrong course	↗	
3 – students feel disadvantaged if they are not taught by their preferred tutor	♥	
4 – Timetable arrangements can affect engagement	U	
5 – cohorts of students have particular characteristics	♥	?
6 – what students and tutors understand to be feedback is different.	♥	T

At the end of Phase 4, I had 5 RO1, 29 RO2 (See Table 11 RO2 themes and sub-themes), and 17 RO3 overarching themes.

**Table 11 RO2 themes and sub-themes**

Themes	Sub-themes	Themes	Sub-themes
Government Policy:	Marketisation	Teaching Experienced:	Appropriate learning environment
	Tuition Fees		The way students learn
	Research Assessment		Tutor credibility
Student Actions:	Active involvement in learning		Tutor's teaching ability
	Enrolment on appropriate course		Quality of teaching
Student Sentiments:	Cultural capital		Quality of T&L resources
	External pressures	University Measures:	Appropriate assessment framework
	Perceived value of year of study		Appropriate capacity planning
	Personal motivation		Appropriate communication channels
	State of mind		Appropriate Institutional support for tutors
Student-Tutor Relationship:	Affected by institutional arrangements		Appropriate management of students
	Can be beneficial		Value attributed to teaching
	Changes over time		
	Differs with each student		
	Requires boundaries		
	Teaching is a vocation rather than a job		
	Tutors want their students to succeed		

### 3.12.5 Phase 5 thematic analysis: defining and naming themes

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), the purpose of Phase 5 is to produce a set of themes that each tell a particular part of the overall story about the data in relation the research question. There should be little if any overlap between the final themes. The final themes may, if they are particularly complex, contain sub-themes (referred to as overarching themes in 3.11.4). Sub-themes represent the hierarchy of meaning within the data and provide a structure for the discussion of the theme.

### **3.12.6 Phase 6 thematic analysis: producing the report**

When writing the report I was mindful of Braun and Clarke's (2006) emphasis on producing an analytic narrative that goes beyond description of the data. The extracts I have selected for inclusion in the analytical narrative in Chapter 4 are intended as illustrations of the arguments I am making in relation to my research questions. Extracts were chosen either because they illustrated points that were prevalent across the interviews conducted or because the implications of the points they raised were of significance or potential interest to NWU. In terms of writing style, Sandelowski (2015) notes the range of styles evident in qualitative research accounts and the lack of agreement on which is the most appropriate. In early drafts of this research methods chapter I adopted a more passive, third person style of writing. Following various conversations, I adopted a more active first person writing style in later drafts which instantly felt a more natural and appropriate style in which to document the finer detail of the social constructionist research I had undertaken. I did not self-interview, for the reasons explained in section 3.9.

### **3.13 Research quality**

The findings from this qualitative study were arrived from a real world setting and not by statistical means. The centrality of reliability and validity, the scientific canons of inquiry, to judgements about its quality are therefore contestable (Saunders et al 2016). In quantitative research, reliability is concerned with the replicability of the results and validity focuses on the accuracy of the means of measurement and whether they actually measured what they were intended to measure (Golafshani 2003). Corbin and Strauss (1990) suggest that reliability and validity should be retained and redefined to fit the realities of qualitative research and the complexities of social phenomena they seek to understand.

Trustworthiness, or rigour, in qualitative research lies at the heart of issues conventionally discussed as reliability and validity (Seale, 1999). Trustworthiness, which is concerned with the "integrity" of the research findings, is essential if they are to make an impact on practice, policy or both. Lincoln and Guba (1985) offer credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability as alternative criteria for judging the trustworthiness of qualitative research. It is against these criteria that judgements on the quality of this research should be made.

Credibility is concerned with the adoption of appropriate research methods, familiarity with the research context, tactics to help ensure honesty in informants and use of reflective commentary (Lincoln and Guba 1985). As researcher and therefore the research instrument, my ability and effort will also inform judgements on the credibility of the research (Golafshani 2003).

The focus on a single institution has not undermined the relevance or significance of the findings. As discussed in 3.6, and supported by the data collected, a tutor's perspective on SE is informed by their past and present experiences of all of the educational institutions they have been or are associated with in their capacities as tutors, students, parents and governors. The choice of semi-structured interviews was consistent with the interpretivist research approach I had adopted. The interviews provided me with access to tutors' understandings, experiences and opinions (Byrne 2004 in Silverman, 2006) and afforded me the opportunity to actively engage with tutors in the co-construction of meaning (Silverman, 2006).

At the time of the interviews, I had been a tutor for ten years and was a part-time student at the organisation under study. I therefore had a detailed knowledge and understanding of the research context and knew in varying degrees the tutors I was interviewing. Table 12 below describes the tutors interviewed and my relationship with them. The terms 'colleague', 'working colleague', and 'close working colleague' indicate the extent of my day-to-day working relationship with each tutor. Whilst I had made the acquaintance of a 'colleague' at institutional or faculty meetings for example, I would not have taught on the same courses as I had with a 'working colleague', or collaborated closely on the design of programmes and programme resources as I had with a 'close working colleague'.

**Table 12 Interviewer / Interviewee Relationship**

<b>Tutor ID</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Gender/Age range</b>	<b>Interviewer/Interviewee Relationship</b>
T1	Senior Lecturer	Male / 50-60yrs	Working colleague
T2	Principal Lecturer	Male / 50-60yrs	Close working colleague
T3	Senior Lecturer	Male / 30-40yrs	Colleague
T4	Principal Lecturer	Male / 40-50yrs	Colleague
T5	Senior Lecturer	Female / 30-40yrs	Close working colleague
T6	Senior Lecturer	Male / 40-50yrs	Colleague
T7	Senior Lecturer	Male / 50-60yrs	Colleague
T8	Principal Lecturer	Female / 50-60yrs	Close working colleague
T9	Senior Lecturer	Male / 50-60yrs	Close working colleague
T10	Principal Lecturer	Male / 50-60yrs	Close working colleague
T11	Principal Lecturer	Female / 30-40yrs	Working colleague
T12	Senior Lecturer	Female / 30-40yrs	Colleague
T13	Senior Lecturer	Female / 50-40yrs	Working colleague
T14	Senior Lecturer	Female / 40-50yrs	Colleague
T15	Senior Lecturer	Female / 30-40yrs	Colleague
T16	Senior Lecturer	Female / 40-50yrs	Working colleague
T17	Senior Lecturer	Male / 30-40yrs	Working colleague
T18	Senior Lecturer	Female / 30-40yrs	Colleague
T19	Senior Lecturer	Female / 30-40yrs	Colleague
T20	Principal Lecturer	Female / 50-60yrs	Close working colleague

The participant information sheet and consent form issued and signed by each participant prior to the interview were among the tactics employed to ensure honesty in participants. Participants were assured in these documents that the confidentiality and anonymity of their contribution to the research would be protected in any subsequent verbal or written reporting and publication of the research findings. Other tactics included asking each participant to choose the date, time and location of the interview, and offering them the opportunity to check the interview transcript.

Dependability is concerned with the provision of a detailed methodological description to allow replication of earlier research and the achievement of the same findings; threats to dependability include participant error and bias, and researcher error and bias (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

The rigorous description of the research design and methods will help those wishing to replicate the study to do so. As explained in section 3.11, I adopted a purposive sampling

strategy, a commonly used technique more focussed on richness of information than participant numbers (Marshall 1996). I therefore I actively selected participants I considered would provide sufficient depth of information to fully address my research objectives.

The potential challenges posed by insider research, in particular those related to the researcher's role in the data collection, are discussed in sections 3.8 and 3.9 respectively. A detailed explanation is presented of each stage of the data analysis from transcription of the interview recordings through to each phase of the thematic analysis. The mobile phone application used to record the interviews and the name and version of computer software package used to analyse the data are specified.

As with all studies, there is the possibility that other data may have led to different findings. This is, of course, a hypothetical statement, but the degree of consensus in the data led this researcher to believe that the views expressed were widespread.

Transferability is concerned with the provision of contextual information and a detailed description of the phenomenon in question. It allows comparisons to be made, in preference to establishing research findings that can be generalised to other relevant setting or groups (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

Section 1.2 provides a detailed and authentic description of the research context. This includes the broader UK HE research context and local research context at NWU, the organisation under study. As stated previously, at the time of the research I was a part-time student and had been employed as a full-time tutor for ten years at NWU. It is this experience alongside the research undertaken that assures the authenticity of my research context description. The thick description (Geertz, 1973) I have provided will inform other's judgements about the possible transferability of my findings to other contexts. The findings of this study are likely to be relevant outside the research context because participant understanding is in most cases informed by teaching and study experiences in other higher education institution contexts.

Confirmability recognises the limitations of the research including any shortcomings in the methods employed and their potential effects (Lincoln and Guba 1985). The limitations of this research are discussed in section 3.14 below. Confirmability also requires a declaration

of the researcher's beliefs and assumptions (Lincoln and Guba 1985). According to Berger and Luckmann (1966) researchers' assumptions about the nature of reality and their chosen ways of inquiring into the nature of the world inform judgements on the value of their research. Whilst I accept that there is a natural world out there, it is I believe through social processes that we access, understand and interpret that reality. It is these beliefs that informed the research design I have described in this chapter.

### **3.14 Research limitations**

All research has limitations and this study is no exception. The limitations are presented here so that the research findings and conclusions can be evaluated with these in mind.

I was mindful of bias when selecting my sample. However, as discussed in section 3.11, I was looking for, and acquired a productive sample comprising tutors of varying lengths of teaching experience, currently involved in teaching and research, and teaching across a range of disciplines in different years of study. Unintentionally there was a reasonable balance of gender and age in the final sample. Although there is arguably an imbalance between principal and senior lecturer representation in the sample this is actually representative of the imbalance within the NWU tutor population.

Although there is the potential for power relationships to distort the interview process, as discussed in section 3.8 this was not the case in this study. At the time, I did not have line management responsibility for any of the participants. In fact, I worked in a different department to many and taught on different programmes to most of the participants. It is perhaps the case that describing my relationship with the tutors I interviewed as researcher/participant implies a hierarchical power relation that in practice did not exist. On reflection, a Coresearcher/coparticipant relationship (Karnieli-Miller et al 2009) better represents the more equal and cooperative research partnership I established with the tutors I interviewed.

The potential for bias is ever-present, particularly in insider research. Whilst complete objectivity is impossible (Bryman and Bell 2007), the audit trail I have provided is evidence that I have acted in good faith and not overtly allowed my personal values and theoretical inclinations to influence the way I conducted the research and the findings derived from it.



By recording and transcribing the interviews, I have opened up my data to scrutiny and my analysis to evaluation by other researchers (Bryman and Bell, 2007).

As a situated agent in the research and a contributor to the knowledge co-created, it was important that I managed my thoughts, biases and preconceptions (Crowder, 2013) so that they were not given undue emphasis (Glaser 1998 in Crowder, 2013). It is recognised and acknowledged that the interpretive stance in this study implies that the researcher is providing their own interpretation of others interpretations of SE, in effect a double interpretation. My approach throughout the interview was therefore to allow the participant to maintain control, for example by allowing them to speak unprompted. Where I had prompted responses through my own contributions to the conversation, these were highlighted in the transcripts and ignored in the data analysis. During transcription, I did not encounter any contributions of a sensitive nature that I felt I needed to omit. According to Mackieson et al (2018) the more text that is coded, the more comprehensive and reliable the results are likely to be. All of the text was coded in this study. The degree of accuracy of the themes and concepts translated from the data is evident in the code definitions and descriptions that encapsulate the themes identified (Mackieson et al 2018), and supported with quotations from the interview transcripts.

A potential limitation of the analysis I have presented is an unavoidable tendency to view the data through my own subjective lens. The data are however available for further analysis and this may reveal similar or different results depending on the subjective lens of the interpreter(s).

### **3.15 Research ethics**

Research ethics traditionally focus on the duties of researcher to respect the autonomy and privacy of their fellow human beings and to maximize the benefits whilst minimizing the harms that flow from our research, so called intrinsic deontological and extrinsic consequentialist principles (Butler, 2002 in Humphrey, 2012). In this open, rather than covert research, the participants were not subjected to the risk of embarrassment or any other material disadvantage (Saunders et al, 2016).

The 'professional dilemmas' describes situations that can arise when one simultaneously occupies a number of professional roles (Humphrey, 2012), in this instance as a researcher and an academic tutor. In particular, on a couple of occasions I wondered whether to act on information shared with me during the interviews. Fortunately, none of the issues was of a worrying level of gravity allowing me to essentially ignore in any context other than my research the wider implications of what I had been told.

At the time I invited a colleague to participate, I provided them with a participant information sheet and a consent form that I invited them to sign.

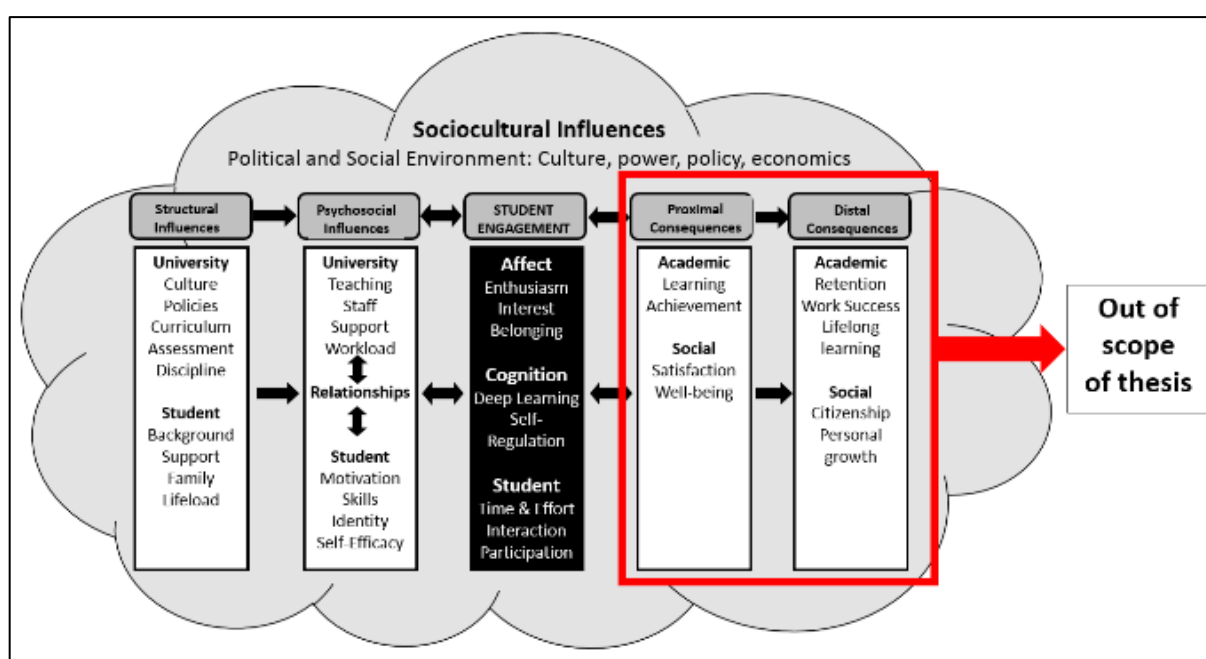
### **3.16 Chapter Summary**

This chapter has outlined the methodology underpinning this study. The adoption of the interpretivist research approach, which is commonplace in the SE literature (see for example Kahu 2011 and 2014; Koskina 2011; Hulme et al 2013; van der Meer 2011; Vuori 2014) rationalised the available choices within the remaining elements of the methodology. The decision to collect rich and detailed data in semi-structured interviews at a single organisation satisfied the social constructionist desire to understand the *"complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it"* (Schwandt, 1998:118). NWU provided a single bounded entity (Cresswell 1994 in Blaikie, 2010) where all of the tutors I wished to study could be located. Purposive sampling permitted the selection of participants considered the most productive sample to answer the research questions (Marshall, 1996). Theoretical saturation determined the sample size. Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to the thematic analysis of the data was followed. The following chapter will show how this methodology applies in practice by presenting the findings of this study.

## 4 Findings and Discussion

### 4.1 Introduction

The reader will recall that Kahu's (2013) Conceptual framework of engagement, antecedents and consequences underpins this thesis. This has been explored in detail in Chapter 2 (Literature Review), and is restated in Figure 6 for clarity. This chapter shows how the framework applies in practice. For reasons of consistency, the model is discussed step-by-step in the same way as in Chapter 2. This allows the reader to conceptualise the literature with the findings.



**Figure 6 Conceptual framework of engagement, antecedents and consequences (Kahu, 2013)**

The findings of this study are discussed in terms of four of the elements of Kahu's (2013) framework namely sociocultural influences, structural influences, psychosocial influences, and student engagement. The proximal and distal consequences of SE are outside the scope of this thesis. The Kahu (2013) framework is informed predominantly by student-focused research.

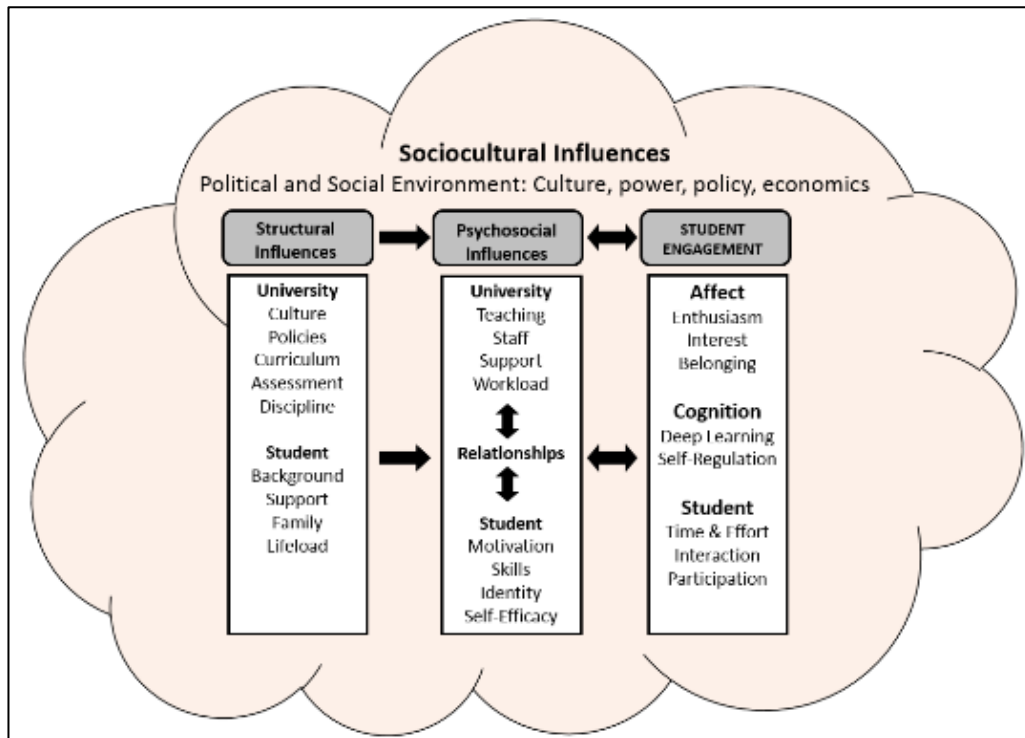
This study provides clarity around tutor perceptions of SE through the application of the Kahu (2013) framework in the analysis of data collected during interviews with tutors. This provides

a useful comparison of student understandings of SE and the understandings of those who teach them. This is missing in the existing literature. To preserve participant anonymity, participants are referred to in the analysis as T1 through to T20; 'T' equating to 'tutor' and the number indicating the order in which the interviews were conducted.

The findings of this study are that in the case of particular influences featured in the original framework, tutors are either silent or offer different interpretations. 'Workload' for example, a psychosocial university influence in Kahu (2013), representing the students' course-related workload is interpreted in this study as the tutors' workload, and identified as influencing directly teaching and thus, indirectly SE. Culture, a structural university influence concerning the culture of the university that the student may, or may not be acculturated into does not feature in any of the tutor interviews. The findings of this study suggest there are differences as well as similarities in understandings of SE informed by student-focussed research and tutor-focussed research. An extended version of the framework informed by the findings of this study is presented and discussed in Chapter 5.

## **4.2 Sociocultural influences**

Though largely overlooked in SE research, the sociocultural influences that originate in the political and social environment where teaching and learning takes place, are critical to understandings of SE (Kahu, 2013). The Kahu (2013) framework addresses this oversight by embedding SE in the political and social environment (See Figure 7). In this section of the results and discussion chapter, NWU tutor views on the sociocultural influences that originate from within this environment are discussed.



**Figure 7 Sociocultural influences (Kahu, 2013)**

#### 4.2.1 Marketisation

Since the 1960s, the policies of successive governments, informed by a neoliberal ideology, have transformed the landscape of UK HE through the marketisation, consumerisation and managerialisation of the HE sector. Once an elite system in which less than 15% of the eligible population participated (Trow, 1973), UK HE is now a mass system in which, in 2015/16, an estimated 49%<sup>1</sup> of the eligible population were deemed likely to participate (DfE, 2017). The positioning of university as ‘a rite of passage’ is not new or commonplace and has been discussed in tandem with matters concerning ‘educational credentialism’ and ‘credentialism’, that is to say the increasing demand for educational qualifications (Bills and Brown, 2011:2; Cusano et al. 2018). However, the potential devaluing of the undergraduate degree qualification as a consequence of increasing numbers of graduates is discussed in only one interview.

<sup>1</sup> The Higher Education Initial Participation Rate (HEIPR) is an estimate of the likelihood of a young person participating in Higher Education by age 30, based on current participation rates (DfE, 2017)

Several tutors blame marketisation for the increasing, and in isolated cases, unsustainable student numbers on programmes. T20, for example, attributes the responsibility for increasing student numbers and a consequent societal expectation that most school leavers will go to university, to the policies of a previous Labour Government. The contribution to increasing student numbers of government efforts to widen participation in HE however, is not mentioned in any of the interviews conducted. Furthermore, only one tutor used the term ‘widening participation’ (WP) when articulating their erroneous assumption that a WP student is a student with a BTEC qualification.

Students rather than the UK taxpayer are now liable for the increasing costs of their higher education. An English graduate in 2015 would have left university with around £44,000 in student debt, significantly more than the £26,000 debt a 2014 English graduate accrued (Vigurs et al. 2016). The removal of the cap on university tuition fees has engendered a ‘consumerist ethos’ amongst students (Kandiko and Mawer, 2013) who see themselves as consumers in a higher education market, assessing and evaluating their course of study in terms of ‘satisfaction’ (Maringe and Sing, 2014).

T15 described HE as *“a marketised system”* in which *“the buyer has to have as much power as the seller”*. This shift in power from the tutor to the student according to T15 makes it difficult to get students

*“to do what they’re supposed to do and getting them through the course [with] good honours”.*

There is a suggestion in this comment that attempts, through marketisation, to commodify, and transform HE into ‘a visible, quantifiable and instrumentally driven process’ (Furedi, 2010:2) might be working.

There is a weight of evidence amongst participants concerning the perceived negative consequences of increasing references to students as customers at NWU. T20 spoke for many when she said,

*“I don’t like the word customer. I think, and unfortunately, it is creating that culture, that they feel that when something they don’t like is given them, they want you to change it.”* (T20)

T4 referred to the more negative connotations of the notion of the student as a customer of the institution noting it was an *“impoverished”* but *“available”* source of student empowerment in HEIs.

*“I don’t want to see our students as customers in order to validate them. I want to try to give them more than that and that’s more difficult to get a handle on isn’t it?” (T4)*

T8’s comment reflects a perceived, potentially divisive aspect of tuition fees among NWA tutors.

*“.....the moment people pay for something they will tend to be instrumental and find fault with it” (T8).*

As Kandiko and Mawer (2013) suggest, students want to know where their tuition fees are spent and how this adds to the quality and value of their degree. Reflecting this view T15 suggested that fee-paying students question what it is that they are paying for and complain when their emails are not responded to within 24 hours. Students are concerned about the value of their educational experience and the value of the expected return on their substantial investment (Kandiko and Mawer, 2013). However, according to T12

*“.....paying £9k doesn’t mean they get a first.....it’s not a transaction on eBay or Amazon”.*

As discussed in section 2.3.3.3, the view that one is indebted academic success rather than having to earn it, is the focus of research into ‘academic entitlement’ (Boswell, 2012; Morrow, 1994) that pre-dates the introduction of tuition fees. The valuing of achievement rather than learning is however associated by Molesworth et al. (2009) with the marketisation of HE.

Optional work-based learning units that have an ‘in-employment’ enrolment prerequisite feature in the curriculum of many NWU courses. This demonstrates an acknowledgment by NWU that many of their students are likely to have to work alongside their studies in order to meet their living costs. However, T15 expresses the frustration some tutors feel about students *“....trying to slot us in around their part time work”*. T15’s comment suggests not only a lack of empathy but also a lack of awareness among NWU tutors of the factors that have given rise to this situation. This is concerning as students from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to have financial concerns that increase throughout their course

of study and, particularly in the final year of study, are more likely to be in paid employment during term time (Cooke et al, 2004). As noted above, NWU increased its intake of disadvantaged students by 330 between 2009/10 and 2014/15 (SMF, 2016), although as also noted, it is unclear whether NWU provides tutors with access to this information. This raises questions over the amount of information tutors have about their students and if and how they accommodate students' individual needs in their teaching. This will be discussed further below.

#### **4.2.2 Research assessment**

An HEI's performance in the government's assessment of research can determine the amount of research funding it is awarded and its rankings in publicly available league tables. An individual tutor's timetable allowances and research related deadlines are likely to determine whether they view research as diverting attention away from teaching, or teaching as diverting attention away from research. T5, a Senior Learning and Teaching Fellow questioned the relevance of university rankings based on REF outcomes, to undergraduates who have come to the university to be taught. This perspective, which is not widely shared amongst the tutors interviewed, might be indicative of different levels of understanding and appreciation of research between research focused and teaching focused tutors. It may also reflect the views of a tutor who identifies as a teacher first and researcher second. What is clear however is that an institution's overall performance in both teaching and research are amongst the determinants of its position in various publicly available league tables, which potentially influence prospective applicant perceptions of the institution. This is particularly the case in international markets where league tables may provide the key or only independent UK HEI evaluation criteria.

#### **4.2.3 Student satisfaction**

The National Student Survey (NSS), which is now the responsibility of the Office for Students, aims to provide prospective students with data to inform their study choices. An institution's performance in the NSS is potentially amongst the determinants of its position in a number of publicly available league tables. NSS scores, at the time the interviews for this research were conducted, were based on final year undergraduate student perceptions of the teaching, assessment and feedback, academic support, organisation and management,



learning resources, and personal development they experienced during their course of study. Although the representativeness and reliability of NSS data is challenged in the literature (Cheng and Marsh, 2010; Porter, 2011), and by a small number of the tutors interviewed in this research, some of the actions of NWU are perceived by tutors to be informed by institutional concerns over future NSS performance and NSS data published. T4 suggests that the NSS provides a “*partial picture*” and T9 that it lacks “*statistical rigour*”. A further weakness of the NSS according to T4 is that it does not provide individual student data for analysis purposes. The institution in the view of T9 lacks the confidence to dismiss the feedback the NSS provides. Although the level of institutional emphasis on the NSS differs throughout the academic year, the following comment illustrates the effects felt by tutors during the assessment period when the interviews for this research were being conducted.

*“We forget why we are there.....what we’ve got to do is pass [them], so we just go in, do our thing, get them all passed in any shape or form.....we get ground down with all that type of thing” (T12).*

T12 also expressed the view that the focus on SATS tests at her son’s primary school was similar to the focus on the NSS at NWU, and that neither were necessarily driving improvements in teaching and learning.

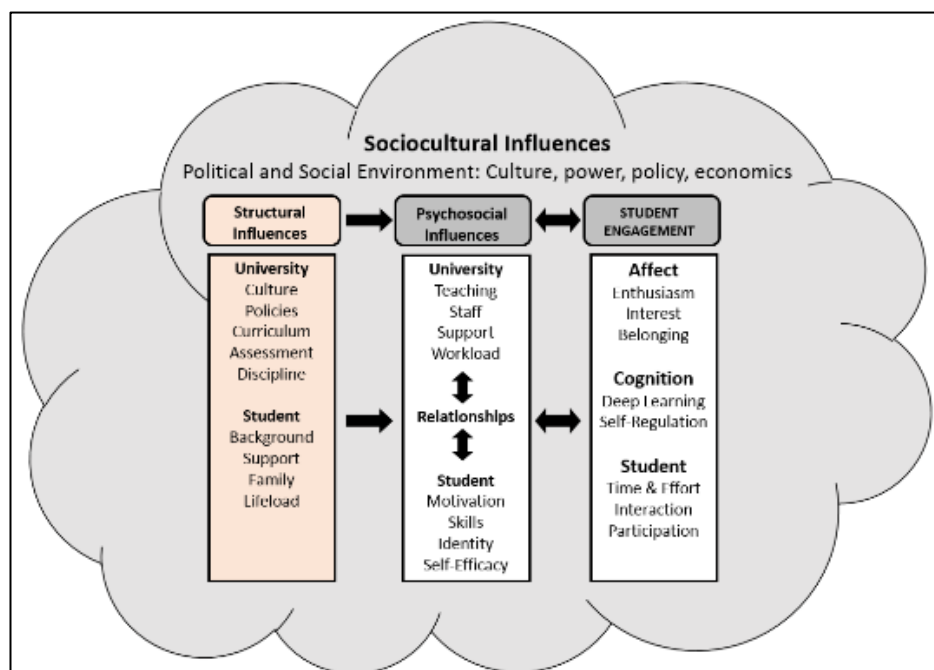
#### **4.2.4 Section summary**

The limited discussion across the tutor interviews of matters relating to the sociocultural context of SE suggests it may be overlooked in practice as well as in the SE research (Kahu, 2013). Tutors who refer albeit cursorily to the influence of government policy were mainly those with course management responsibilities and therefore more likely to be involved in conversations concerning institutional policy responses. Whilst tuition fees, widening participation and the NSS, all instruments of the government, are highly influential in UK HE, they feature in only seven interviews. The student as customer personification is seen as problematic for engagement particularly insofar as the attempts to impose engagement-related behaviours on paying customers are concerned. NSS data are seen as questionably representative, lacking statistical rigour, and in certain aspects, morality aside, easily responded to, for example good honours.

A primary focus in many of the interviews is the perceived impact on tutors workload and teaching, of the institutional responses to government policy rather than the policies themselves. These matters are discussed and analysed below.

### 4.3 Structural influences

Kahu (2013) subdivides the ‘structural influences’ of SE (See Figure 8) into university structural influences and student structural influences. University structural influences originate in the characteristics of the institution and the institutional arrangements that shape the context in which teaching and learning takes place.



**Figure 8 Structural influences (Kahu, 2013)**

Student structural influences that originate in the convergence of the pressures emanating from different aspects of a student’s past and present lives and future expectations, are referred to by Kahu (2013) as the student’s ‘Lifeload’. The university and student structural influences featured in tutor interviews are discussed below.

#### 4.3.1 University structural influences

Although the Kahu (2013) framework suggests the culture of the university can influence SE, it is not discussed in these terms during the NWU tutor interviews. However, particular

aspects of the policies and practices of the institution, that according to Wilms (2003 in Zyngier, 2008) permeate all aspects of the student's HE experience, do pre-occupy the overwhelming majority of the tutors interviewed. In particular, tutors comment on student recruitment, capacity planning in terms of acquisition and deployment of teaching resource and physical accommodation. The approaches to managing students enshrined in attendance and assessment policies are also discussed.

#### **4.3.1.1 Culture**

Cultural differences are blamed by Thomas (2002) for the significant barriers to engagement experienced by many students, in particular non-traditional students, who describe their experience of starting university as a culture shock (Christie et al. 2008), learning shock (Griffiths et al. 2005), and feeling like 'a fish out of water' (Thomas, 2002:431). University culture and cultural differences received scant attention in the interviews conducted for this study. As indicated in 1.2.3, NWU has a long-standing commitment to widening participation (WP) in HE, which aims to address what Trowler (2015:298) refers to as a 'structural disadvantage or historic exclusion and underrepresentation in higher education'. NWU's induction and transition arrangements must therefore ensure the successful acculturation into the university of all their students, including the substantial number of intended WP beneficiaries among them. As indicated in the following discussions on student recruitment however, many of the tutors interviewed were not involved and unfamiliar with student recruitment at NWU. Furthermore, a lack of access to student demographic data makes it difficult to judge at a glance, the appropriateness of NWU induction and transition arrangements.

T18, who previously taught in Further Education (FE), emphasised the importance of an established and regular routine for students when they first enter HE from a college or school environment. Reflecting on the differences in these experiences T18 commented.

*"I'm not sure just seeing them for 12 hours a week is enough. I think they need more routine than that. They've come from a college or a school environment and it's such a culture shock to them being [in for] only 12 hours and nobody's really chasing you or looking out for you." (T18)*

This is potentially significant given the suggestion that for some students the contact time their university education is providing is the value-for-money measure they apply (Kandiko and Mawer, 2013).

When asked about an alleged tutor perception that NWU provided its students with too much support, reflecting again on their FE experience, T18 commented that this was possible but in her view it is

*“the way school and college is going. I think [NWU are] just following the trend that is coming through from schools and FE colleges and [students are] not as independent these days.....but that’s not just us at university, that’s parents, that’s everybody.”*

References to university culture in tutor interviews were confined to discussions around the tutor experience. T4 for example lamented the lack of a culture of supporting “*professional development*” in terms of tutor’s “*daily practice*” at NWU.

*“We have a culture of sending people off to a conference, or maybe letting them do a PhD but not in terms of our daily practice.....who is there supporting us, telling us, ‘your session that I observed was brilliant, it had that kind of impact actually and I observed when you said (**this**), that three hundred heads went (**gesture**).....and it wasn’t just about the exam’.....you know, who gives you that, nobody!” (T4)*

#### **4.3.1.2 Student recruitment**

NWU is a popular destination for undergraduate students. In August 2017 when many universities, including Russell Group universities, were offering places through clearing, all but two of the Faculty of Business and Law undergraduate programmes were already full. Whilst in business terms this is an enviable position to hold, as this section will demonstrate, it is the terms and conditions of student recruitment that concern tutors.

Anecdotal evidence suggests NWU departments involved in the recruitment process have different targets and objectives. Whilst the number of students is likely to be more pressing for the central Recruitment and Admissions Team, given the importance attributed by the institution to retention, attainment and progression, it is the calibre of the students that concerns the tutors. NWU specify the entry requirements for programmes of study in terms of actual or equivalent UCAS points for all post-16 qualification grades. Each programme has entry tariffs pre-set and published on the NWU website and with UCAS. However, if a

programme under-recruits and goes into Clearing, the entry tariff may be adjusted to reflect the current recruitment position on that programme. These decisions are made by the University Executive Group, and the outcomes are notified to all departments as a 'fait accompli'. With the exception of Maths and English GCSE/O Levels at grade A-C (or equivalent), pre-entry qualification subjects are generally not specified for programmes offered by the Faculty of Business and Law.

Although universities have recruitment targets, it is important that places are offered to those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them (in agreement with Robbins, 1963). Tutors involved in course leadership questioned the reliability of UCAS points specifically. T10 for example questioned the reliability of the mechanisms through which UCAS points were achieved.

*"Have they got the [UCAS] points through a process of their own learning or by the wiles of their tutors and parents and so on....." (T10)*

Although T8 was the only tutor to express the view that *"....GCSEs are often neglected and they tell you a lot"*, tutors on some programmes have resisted NWU management attempts over the years to reduce the GCSE threshold during recruitment.

Approximately half of participants indicated a level of disconnection with the recruitment process. T6 commented,

*"I have no way of knowing the points score of any student, maybe it's on the system somewhere [but] even if I knew it I don't know if it would matter".*

Commenting on UCAS points specifically, T2 who has also been involved in course leadership over many years said

*"[UCAS points have] become too vague and generalistic so you're not really discriminating in whether [the student has] the ability to do the course".*

On a similar point, T7 noted

*"I did a brief spell on clearing this year and we were giving equal weight in terms of points to general studies....going back a while now it either only got counted half or not at all".*

The same tutor added

*"I can think of a student who had achieved an 'A' in general studies and a sort of C D E kind of profile on the other stuff. So this equivalence of points is an interesting one rather like, you know, Oxford and Cambridge don't quite give the weighting to drama studies that other institutions do" (T7).*

Possible reasons for and solutions to some of the arguably controversial points raised in these entry requirement related comments are evident in the following comments from T9, an experienced tutor with minimal involvement in recruitment activities.

*"I think you have to raise the entry requirements just to keep up with the inflation of A-Level performance that's been going on for 20 years. We shouldn't delude ourselves that our students are getting better. They are just the same as they've always been. They've just got better A-Levels but that's because everyone is getting better A-Levels." (T9).*

T12 who, at the time of the interview was marking assessments, noted:

*"the standard [...] is quite poor. My daughter's in secondary school and the standard of what she's doing is miles apart, but is that our fault? Is it the university's application process? Have we got too low a threshold? I don't know is the honest answer."*

Referring specifically to students on the final year of the programme, T12 also noted,

*"I know this is being recorded, but I would say 25% [...] shouldn't be on the degree", then added, "we've had 8 direct level 6 entrants and they are poor, all of them really poor".*

Offering perhaps some support for this viewpoint, T4, who is involved in course leadership, said

*"We did have a phase of [raising the entry requirements....] and this year is the best year we've ever had I think and they do represent the higher entry. Our good honours statistics are higher than they've ever been and we've had a record number of firsts as well..... and by the way I [and our externals] do not believe we are giving them away".*

However, T4 added that the improvement in performance also coincided with a *"significant change to the way we deliver our teaching"*. Worth noting however is that withdrawal/non-completion rates are reportedly higher amongst students with lower entrance qualifications (Christie et al. 2004).

The evidence identifying unmet expectations as a key reason for withdrawal (Baxter and Hatt, 2000), suggests students will benefit from having realistic expectations of their university experience. Although there is outreach activity ongoing at NWU, there was no mention in the interviews conducted of any the university-school/college activity that (Shulock, 2010; Wilson-Strydom, 2016) suggest would provide information on university readiness to inform earlier course choice decisions. This is particularly important for students who do not have the HE experience of family or friends to draw on. Maringe's (2006) research which highlights the importance to students of their school tutor's advice is further justification of the need for universities to review their approach to recruitment and their relationship with the schools and colleges that 'supply' them with students.

T1 is one of two of the tutors interviewed to hold a voluntary school governor post. T1 described the outreach activity he was involved in under the auspices of his parent governor role, which involved teaching specific sessions at the school. According to T1 this showed the students,

*"....this is what university life is like, this is how you're taught. I'm trying to... provide them with some idea [of what to expect at university]. It'll still be a culture shock when they arrive but maybe for these people it'll be a bit less."*

Although it is unclear whether any of the students T1 was teaching were WP students, this does not devalue the undertaking.

The potential gap between eligibility and readiness for university identified by Shulock (2010) and Wilson-Strydom (2016) is evident at NWU. At NWU, university readiness is addressed in a level three foundation year for selected students who do not achieve the required level four entry points, and after enrolment for students who do.

Tutors teaching sports management students talked candidly about the issues their students experienced when first tackling academic study. They recounted advising students to "play the academic game" and questioned the relevance of 'reading the literature' in terms of its impact upon employability. Although other participants did not express these views, it might be that these tutors are actually more in tune than their NWU peers with the current UK policy-makers who are moving towards measuring the value of a university degree in terms of the salaries graduates from the degree can expect to earn. Maringe (2006) suggests that

return on investment in terms of career prospects after graduation and current performance in the subject, have a greater influence on a student's course choice than their interest in the subject. This is important given the influence of interest on SE. Student interest is discussed in section 4.5.3.1.

NWU needs to ensure that university is appropriate for the students they offer places to and that the places offered are on courses that are right for the students. The sports management tutors highlighted the importance of providing applicants with detailed course information online and at open days. T18 recounted discussions with sports students who had submitted course transfer requests because they had not clearly understood the focus of the course.

*".....we've started to apply business theory to sport they've said 'I don't want to do that, I just wanted to come and play sport and learn about sport'.....".*

Poor choice of course is among the reasons for withdrawal (Christie et al. 2004).

Vignette 1 describes a situation familiar to tutors who have taken calls from students during the clearing period and it encapsulates a number of concerns discussed already in this thesis.

### ***Vignette 1 Recruitment in clearing (T7)***

*A student came to us via clearing....*

*[I asked] "What did you really want to do?"*

*[Student said] "I really wanted to do history"*

*I said "Probably the best thing for you to do then is to retake and do history next year".*

*...I didn't feel I could make him an offer [because] he was not doing history which he really wanted to do and he was...he'd been shoved, possibly by parents, onto business information technology. People who want to do geography [choose] a geography course. Astrophysics, languages, literature the same. In business, it's all a bit....general*

The student in Vignette 1 has not satisfied the entry requirements of his first choice degree. However, meeting his own, and potentially other's expectations that he will progress directly into higher education is apparently more important than delaying the entry, retaking the assessments concerned with a view to meeting the entry requirements of his first choice degree. In the short term, offering this student a place on the Business Technology degree arguably satisfies a number of stakeholder objectives. By securing a university place, the



student avoids disappointing his family and in the process, moves the university and the tutor closer to their recruitment target. It is possible, though not inevitable, that in the longer term, the student's satisfaction with their studies and their retention and progression on the course will be adversely affected by the choice they have made.

T8, who has been involved over a number of years in various initiatives aimed at improving retention, suggested that when a student has a history of changing courses

*"It's usually a sign that studying isn't of interest to them but for one reason or another they're locked into that as an option."*

Other tutors commented on the difficulties teaching and encouraging the involvement of students that are not happy with their course. T14 used the metaphor of *"pulling teeth"*.

T15 spoke for many saying,

*"there's only so much you can do.....I don't think they should be here.....they've been told that they should be here, but maybe university is not for them".*

The influence of other's expectations on students is apparent in these tutor comments

#### **4.3.1.3 Capacity planning**

Capacity planning concerns the acquisition and allocation of teaching resource and physical accommodation. At NWU, the acquisition and allocation of teaching resource is the responsibility of individual departments and physical accommodation the responsibility of the institution. The acquisition and allocation of teaching resource and physical accommodation is particularly challenging for programmes with student numbers described by one tutor as *"just unsustainable"*. A consequence of large programmes is high enrolment numbers on the core units and limited teaching resource compounds the problems for those resourcing teaching. Large classes can lower levels of engagement (active learning) (Cuseo, 2007; Gibbs, 1992) and discourage the student-tutor interactions that are strongly associated with positive student outcomes (Mulryan-Kyne, 2010). Mirroring the literature, half the tutors interviewed allude to the detrimental effect of large classes on the student experience and learning. However, as Ehrenberg et al. (2001) noted, class size is an alluringly quick and easily manipulated variable.

Few participants acknowledged the obvious difficulties experienced by those at NWU tasked with acquiring the necessary human and physical teaching resources. However, the vast majority of participants acknowledged the often-negative impacts on teaching. Lectures are widely used within NWU, with lecture theatre capacities and planned audiences of between 120 and 280. Student numbers in tutorial groups can be anywhere between the high teens and low 40s. Almost half of participants assumed that large lectures and tutorials are the way in which increasing student numbers are accommodated in an institution with limited teaching resource and room capacity. T10, a course leader involved over many years in resourcing programmes, observed that *"the bigger the class the more difficult it is"* but acknowledged this was always an issue when *"working within a resource envelope"*. Recognition of teaching resource constraints is evident in the comment from T8, also a course leader, that *"we're doing most of the things that we can do with the resource we've got"*. T8 also suggested that large class sizes were a response to a low staff-student ratio, and that the institution was attempting to *"have it both ways"* by relying on lower than 100% attendance. *"It's pile it high, sell it cheap"* according to T4 which is a similar view to Cuseo (2007) who identifies large class sizes as a convenient cost-cutting strategy.

Reflecting on a personal belief that a large cohort was perhaps being used by some tutors in the same department as an excuse for their inaction T11 commented,

*"Their NSS is 98 or 90-something.....so their big numbers aren't affecting their student's happiness".*

Although T16, a tutor with experience of teaching both large and small lectures and tutorial sessions, suggested that students in smaller classes felt *"quite comfortable with each other. I think they feel comfortable with us..."*, they were actually referring to large tutorial sessions with poor attendance.

High enrolment numbers on the core units also require large teaching teams. According to T15, a tutor from one such teaching team, this has led to a situation where tutors are *"all working from the same guidelines and it's very, very rigid"*. Referring to a particular unit with an 18-strong teaching team T15 commented

*"trying to meet the same time targets and trying to teach from the same book, for me that's not engagement cos [the tutors] are not engaging with the*

*material, we're just sort of repeating it.....we're regurgitating it, something that we do year after year."*

In common with a number of other participants, T15 expressed the view that smaller teaching teams provide a greater degree of the essential flexibility in delivery that is difficult to achieve with any consistency in larger teaching teams. T15 suggested that larger classes could potentially be taught by two tutors, increasing the feasibility of providing individual student support and formative feedback during the session. This approach has already been adopted on some units within the faculties, although feedback from students and tutors on the experience is not readily available.

Teaching resource constraints, the policy of employing PhD students to teach, and the need to cover unscheduled staff absence, are among the reasons why the NWU employs fixed-term associate lecturers. T2, a principal lecturer involved over many years in course leadership, acknowledges the usefulness to the institution of associate lecturers who are *"engaged in September when we've got problems or gaps and you try and get someone who is reliable in there"*. T2 noted that associate lecturers were *"perfectly fine to use as long as we engage them in our processes and in our practice, get to know them....seek their ideas out and offer them support and development"*. However, along with four other participants T2 recognised that the institution tended to *"let them do their own thing completely unsupervised"*. This experience is familiar to many tutors at NWU who began their teaching careers as associate lecturers at the institution. Concerns expressed through organised class actions about an associate lecturer's teaching can be detrimental to the longer term engagement of the class and particularly distressing for the inexperienced associate lecturer. As T2 noted, *"it has always been a very haphazard business"*.

Tutors expressed concerns about the effect large classes have on the student experience, in particular on their in-class participation and learning. T2 for example commented that

*"getting students to offer their ideas and opinions and engage with you in a dialogue and debate is becoming a very difficult thing to preserve in more modern mass higher education because of numbers"*.

The notion of "herding" students (Cuseo, 2007) into huge classes is particularly problematic for first year students in who it can encourage passive spectating that can lead to the development of unproductive mental habits or predispositions to learning that persist beyond

the first year. The opportunities in large classes to provide the individual feedback NWU students value are, as Cuseo (2007) suggests, significantly reduced. T14 observed that in large classes, *“it is difficult to get round to everybody”* and *“to be able to give some one-to-one”*.

According to T6, students in large classes ask questions occasionally but are generally a *“passive audience”* leaving the tutor with no idea about what they are thinking. T2 noted *“It’s just a one way delivery”* and on a similar point to T6 commented *“you don’t know [...] what they take from [what you have said]”* (T2).

T20 suggested that less confident students might be unwilling to express an opinion in front of a large audience. T20 also referred to a *“group mentality”* that anecdotally exists in some of the classes. Tutors often refer in informal conversations to a group or groups within a class or cohort whose in-class behaviour either discourages or encourages outsiders to engage or not to engage. There are no suggestions in the interviews on how this situation is, or has been dealt with. Tutors also commented on the impact of large classes on their ability to control the classroom, an issue also featured in student feedback. According to Carbone (1999), the anonymity and impersonal nature of large groups can illicit behaviour unlikely to be exhibited in small classes including arriving late for class and/or leaving early, off-task behaviour resulting in noise and distraction during teaching sessions. The ability of particular tutors to control the classroom is clearly an important consideration for the students, tutors and the institution.

Formal student-tutor contact time, identified by Kandiko and Mawer (2013) as a student measure of value-for-money university education featured in four interviews. The apparent consensus among these tutors was that although contact time is limited, it can be beneficial in varying degrees for the student, at different points throughout their studies. The focus of the comments, however, is on timetabled and published contact time (including for example tutor office hours, personal tutor meetings etc.) rather than informal impromptu interactions and meetings. T14’s frustration at the reduction in contact time is evident in the following quote,

*“Until students start really saying over a period of time, you are reducing our contact time, you are reducing our opportunities to learn, nothing’s going to be done is it?”.*

T14 highlights what she perceives to be the inadequacies of an approach within the faculty to present extra-curricular academic activities as value-adding (even though attendance at such sessions is notoriously poor), whilst simultaneously reducing level 5 timetabled tutorial sessions from two hours to ninety minutes.

An unintended and unacceptable consequence of mandatory tutor office hours, according to T16, is that it becomes *“a subconscious or direct message of saying actually, that’s all you have to do”*. According to T8, over and above these times, *“it comes down to what you as a person are prepared to sacrifice”*.

Limited room numbers and room capacities govern the student timetable. The timetable is identified by a number of tutors as an influence on student engagement levels. Recently, the institution has extended the teaching day to include early morning and early evening taught sessions and taken steps to timetable fewer, longer days for individual students. The few tutors interviewed whose teaching sessions are timetabled at the start of the teaching day noted an adverse impact on attendance. Responding to the question ‘Do you have good attendance [on your unit]?’, T17, a popular tutor on a popular L4 unit replied,

*“Not the 9 o’clock lecture, just because they can’t get out of bed. I’d say maximum 50% attendance. But they’ll start filtering in to the 10 o’clock tutorials and especially the afternoon one is always packed.”*

#### **4.3.1.4 Attendance monitoring**

Attendance is often treated as synonymous with SE and is featured in most measures of engagement (Markwell, 2007). Poor attendance is however a recognised issue in HE. The experience at NWU appears to support anecdotal evidence suggesting attendance at large lectures falls off throughout the term, often down to between 30% and 40% by the end (McKeachie 1999 in Isbell and Cote, 2009). Attendance monitoring is amongst the various NWU policies aimed at managing and measuring the engagement of students enrolled on the programmes. Attempts at NWU to record and monitor attendance manually have been ongoing for a number of years although online registration was recently introduced for first year students. According to the course leaders and first year tutors interviewed, online registration does not encourage attendance because students can register their attendance anywhere in the building rather than just in the classroom where the session is timetabled.

Wireless capacity issues often prevent students from registering, raising questions over the integrity of the data recorded in the system. At the time of writing NWU has implemented a more efficient swipe card entry system for recording student attendance. This was trialled at level 4 in 2016/17, extended into level 5 in 2017/18 and will be further extended to cover level 6 in the academic year 2018/19. Data from the swipe card entry system provides attendance management information that allows the faculty to take proactive as well as reactive measures where necessary to address none or poor student attendance. NWU plan to provide students with online access to their attendance data in academic year 2018/19.

It is unclear which, if any, of the reasons for monitoring attendance presented by MacFarlane (2013), apply at NWU. These include 'accountability to society', 'student well-being', and 'preparation for the workplace' (MacFarlane, 2013). However, what is clear in the following extracts is a lack of consensus among tutors on the purpose and usefulness of attendance monitoring per se and where the responsibility for attendance management should lie.

T14, who has worked hard to improve the student's attendance and engagement expressed concerns about the attendance related measures and procedures imposed by NWU. In particular T14 expressed feelings of disempowerment stemming from the recruitment of support staff tasked with managing student attendance matters.

*"I haven't got a clue what's going on with the attendance system now in level 4. I've disengaged from it because I'm not part of that process any more. It's all done by other people. You've taken the authority away from me whereas previously as a unit leader with registers, I had the authority to go in and say 'you're not attending' and issue academic warnings....why would I now go in there and [reprimand them] about [their] attendance when I've got no authority." (T14)*

A number of tutors involved in final year teaching expressed the view that students are capable of making informed choices about attending classes. Whilst this view is not necessarily widely shared, course leader T11 noted that attendance warning letters are not issued to final year students because they "*know the consequences of not attending*". T11 also suggested there had been a positive response on their programme to the threat of withdrawal in attendance letters issued over a number of years to first and second year students, but due to administrative issues in the last academic year attendance letters had not been issued and attendance had fallen dramatically. A tutor from a different department

suggested attendance letters did not have the desired affect but this was not quantified. Institutional data suggests that attendance letters have a range of effects on students ranging from no effect, to short-lived or lasting effect. A number of tutors point to there being no consequence for not attending or engaging more broadly.

The logical consequence of poor or non-attendance, it seems reasonable to suggest, is a negative impact on attainment. However there are examples in a number of the interviews of students who do not attend, either regularly or at all, still achieving high levels of attainment. The fact that these students are easily recalled suggests they may be exceptions. T9 for example spoke of one of his final year students.

*“A long time ago I had a student who would come and see me every week and say, ‘what are you doing in the tutorial this week?’ and I would tell him and he’d say ‘well I don’t think I’ll bother coming then’, and he got a first and he was able to make a perfectly reasoned judgement about whether his time was worthwhile doing something else or coming to the tutorial. And I was perfectly happy with that... because he was a grown-up and he could make those decisions himself and I think we should encourage that”*

There is substantial evidence in the literature and in tutor’s lived experience of students who underperform and recognise they have underperformed due to lack of attendance and engagement more broadly. A challenge for tutors is assisting students in recognising the risks associated with non-attendance and non-engagement earlier than the point at which they receive a disappointing set of results. The following excerpt from a recent email received from a first year international student is illustrative of this challenge.

*“The second assignment I failed. My grades is only 37 points. I am really embarrassed. This also warned me that I also failed as a student. I spent too much time on useless things, not learning. This is something that deserves my reflection and self-criticism.”*

The following comment from T18 is representative of the view of many tutors expressed during the interviews for this study and during informal conversations.

*“Wouldn’t you think that is you were saddling yourself with £27k of debt for the fees alone that that would be some sort of incentive to turn up [to class]?”,*

Experience suggests however, that things may not be quite so simple. The potential impact of timetabling on attendance is evident in the T13’s comment.

*“Out of 35 yesterday I had 26 and I think what really helped was [the tutorial] was just after the lecture. And I think [in this instance] we thought this through... they’ve got 3 hours rather than just 1 hour in a day. I think that’s hugely helpful. I think bundling [timetabled sessions] together helps because they don’t have to get out of their bed [.....] for just one hour of [classes]”.*

A number of tutors alluded to the mixed messages in the requirement to attend timetabled classes and the increasing provision of timetabled class resources on the NWU Moodle virtual learning environment. Speaking for many on the perceived negative impact on attendance the following tutors noted,

*“maybe we’ve put so much [...] on Moodle that these students think [they] don’t need to come in because it’s all online” (T12)*

*“I don’t think things are any better than they were 30 years ago, or worse. [We’ve just put so much online] for them, they don’t have to leave their rooms” (T9)*

The impact on attendance of the planned institution-wide introduction of lecture capture will be an interesting focus for future research.

It is clear from the literature, in the interviews for this study that the reasons attributed to non-attendance at timetabled curricular, extra-curricular, academic and social sessions are many and varied. T12 for example recounted,

*“I had one lad last year who boldly strutted in 8 weeks after they’d just started, and said ‘Hi, my name’s James, you don’t know me but I’m on the first year of the course’ and I said ‘well nice of you to turn up’. I said ‘and where have you been’.....’oh’ he said, ‘I’ve blown my loan and got bladdered, but I’m skint now so I’m in’”.*

Knowing and understanding the reasons for non-attendance is a complex affair for all those involved. As illustrated in the following tutor comments, the impact on attendance of assessment (discussed in the next section) is double-edged. NWU tutor comments suggest that whilst some students are more likely to attend classes when the assessment on the unit is imminent or being discussed other students are still absent. T16 noted a negative impact on attendance at their classes when an assessment was imminent in another unit the students were studying. T17 commented that once the assignment has been submitted attendance drops significantly. However, *“when the exams get closer you see a few more people that you’ve not seen for a while” (T17)*. T16 describes how they make a point of including



assessment advice and guidance in each session in order to encourage attendance. T16 also noted a change in student attendance behaviour as assessment dates approached.

*“This time of year when people can’t make one [session], they’ll come to another....whereas you don’t see much of that earlier on in the year. People are very focused now on getting ready for their exams”. (T16)*

Many tutors expressed a similar view to that evident in the literature suggesting what counts is what happens in class, but of course, the student has to be present in the first instance. T10 for example commented,

*“Students all turn up to the exams unless they’re really ill or they’ve had significant problems, or they’re dropping out. The reason they go to the exam is because they’ve got to pass the unit and proceed, and it’s costing them a load of money. Do they all turn up to the lectures? No. So you’ve got to then ask the question, does the lecture have any value. If only 50% are turning up, what’s wrong with the lecture?”*

T14 noted that attendance monitoring allows the institution to identify those in danger of “falling off the radar”. This suggests it is important to have conversations with students that establish and reinforce the relationship and safe-space in which the ‘lifeload’ related issues they are dealing with can be aired.

#### **4.3.1.5 Assessment framework**

Assessment is described as “the engine that drives learning” (Cowan 2005 in Race, 2006) and more influential to learning behaviour and learners’ experience than teaching (Bloxham, 2007). Gibbs (1999:41) presents assessment as ‘the most powerful lever’ teachers have at their disposal, ‘to influence the way students respond to a course and behave as learners’. It is therefore unsurprising that assessment features in the large majority of the interviews conducted for this study, with most of the tutors expressing the view that assessment drives engagement. However, there is an evident view among the tutors interviewed that NWU restrictions on the number of assessments per unit are problematic. At the time of writing the restriction is 2 assessments per 30 credit unit. T9 and T6 suggested more frequent, shorter assessments would encourage and highlight the importance of attendance and independent study. T13 also expressed the view that *“The quantity of work they are being asked to do....it’s too little...I feel the learning curve is not sharp enough for the brighter students.”*

According to T9 if there was a genuine concern for engagement in terms of student learning, the institution

*“would revisit assessment completely. We’d have far more of it but shorter; not these end of year 3-hour sit down exams [where students] regurgitate stuff that they’ve learned....there’s no understanding in it, it’s a memory test”.*

This is one of a number of comments suggesting SE might not be the main concern of the institution. T14 for example suggested,

*“There’s probably a reluctance to do more assessment because that would have an impact on staff”.*

It seems that Boud’s (1990) caution against the reproduction of what the tutor says rather than deep understanding and critical thinking has gone unheeded at NWU although the desire to take heed is apparent among tutors. There is a sense that the NWU assessment regime is imposed rather than negotiated, prioritising resource rather student related concerns.

Changes to assessment arrangements unavoidably have implications for the workload of both tutors and students. The nature, design and frequency of an assessment and the marking and feedback this generates have broader resourcing implications, for example more tutors needed to cover the additional work generated. As Gibbs and Simpson (2005) point out however designing engaging assessments without increasing marking becomes more difficult in a climate of increasing class sizes, which as indicated earlier in this chapter, is the case at NWU. Large volumes of marking and providing student feedback are amongst the problems experienced by tutors teaching large classes (Ward and Jenkins, 1992).

Concerns within NWU over low levels of attainment in unit assessments have focused attention on the nature of the assessments set. Measures aimed at raising attainment levels on units where low levels of attainment persist over time often involve the replacement of examinations with alternative coursework format assessments. Although examinations are according to T10 a test of memory rather than a deeper understanding, they are generally viewed at NWU as taking less time to mark than coursework. This is partly because at NWU, tutor feedback on examinations has traditionally not been offered automatically to students and can therefore be less detailed. More recently, however, opportunities to receive feedback on examination performance have been promoted to students at NWU. The need

to provide more detailed and developmental examination feedback is likely to increase the marking and feedback effort and consequently lessen the efficiency of examinations as a form of assessment.

Low levels of attainment in the final year of a degree programme adversely affect the degree classification awarded and the publicly available 'good honours' statistics of NWU. At NWU, assessment performance in the final year is either the only or a significant determinant of the degree classification awarded. The tutors teaching on units assessed through examinations suggested that examinations could encourage an instrumental approach in students, who demand increasingly more detailed information on what will be examined. As a result of this T19 noted

*"...you're measuring then memory on issues that you've told them [are] important, not engagement with the subject."*

The institution does not discourage the provision of examination related information. However, some tutors are unhappy with the behaviour it encourages, the implications of which are captured in the following comments from final year tutor T9.

*"They know that the assignment is probably linked to the fifth lecture and the fifth and sixth tutorial and so they'll go to those ones and what happens to all the others..... In a sense, lectures and tutorials become optional because they're not directly linked to assessment and we don't address that at all. We kind of just shrug our shoulders and say ok, we've got 20 lectures but 10 of them will be irrelevant".*

Many tutors have experienced in class an almost tangible drop in interest and attention in some students following confirmation that the topic under discussion is not on the examination paper. Many colleagues share the experience of seemingly disinterested students enthusiastically picking up recording materials when topics are highlighted as relevant to an assessment.

First year tutors face a particularly challenging SE related issue linked to the fact that first year assessment performance does not influence the final degree classification awarded. This has led to an apparent view among students that the first year does not count and in some cases, less effort expended on studies. Informing students that their first year results will to an

extent influence the success of their year 3 study abroad or industrial placement applications is among the efforts of tutors to dispel this view.

As competition within the HE sector really bites, Brown (2015) suggests, there may be more instances where academic judgements are overturned by managers pre-occupied with customer reactions and potential impacts on institutional revenues. Grade inflation is a potential response to such situations. There are suggestions in some of the interviews and anecdotal evidence within departments of informal pressure on tutors to raise unit assessment marks. The following quotes provide evidence of this claim and the associated frustrations felt by some tutors.

*"I was told, 'you've got to make sure [you] get so many 2.1s and I said [.....] but some of these students are not [upper two's].....a lot of them were getting low marks in the exam and yet eventually they were coming out with a first class degree.....[it makes you think] how on earth has that happened. How can somebody who can barely string a sentence together on an exam paper.....come out with a first class degree"*

*"I got an 'oh dear well that's not very good' when the average mark for a unit was 54%. So the average mark for this unit is 54% cos it's bloody hard and this is brand new stuff but I'm pretty sure that the average mark for dissertations next year will go up as a result, because I'm teaching them how to read and how to write, and I'm teaching them academic skills and they're not learning it anywhere else."*

Expressing a view best described as 'achievement is relative' T18 noted

*"not every student is going get a first or a 2.i...for some students, passing a degree is a huge achievement. Perhaps we don't recognise that enough".*

Failure was identified by two tutors as almost inevitable in some cases, and part of the learning process. T10 suggested that *"all students have a right to fail.....if they choose to do so"* adding *"you learn a lot by failure"*. T9 expressed the view that NWU's concern about failure rates was related concerns about *"reputation, league tables, understandably, which is a lot to do with progression, the number of 2.i's....all of these kind of things"*.

In relation to a perceived bureaucratisation within NWU that is removing any sense of creativity and flexibility in assessment, T7 expressed concerns that at some point tutors would be asked to provide students with model answers (as distinct from general guidelines) for

mock assessment questions. Since the interviews for this study were conducted, the assessment pro-forma issued by the faculty includes this requirement.

As discussed in 4.3.1.4, a perhaps an unintended consequence of assessment is the negative impact assessment dates have on attendance. Evidence suggests that in the weeks where assessments are due for submission many NWU students do not attend any timetabled classes, or only attend those classes on which the assessment is focused.

#### **4.3.2 Student structural influences**

This section considers the student characteristics that tutors identify as potentially influencing engagement with learning. ‘Background’ is interpreted here as the student’s upbringing and includes the nature and influence of their parents education and their own previous education experience, and the family’s involvement in the student’s HE studies. ‘Lifeload’ represents the students lived reality (Kahu, 2013) and is acknowledgement of the varying impact all the pressures a student has in their life, including university, can have at different times on their engagement with learning.

##### **4.3.2.1 Background**

Key aspects of the student journey are influenced by an individual’s background, from the choice of institution and course of study, to their expectations of the whole university experience. Clarity of understanding and equitable participation in the tertiary system learning process is particularly important to students from ‘non-traditional’ backgrounds (Anderson 2002). First-in-family students for example are less likely to have the experience of university-graduated parents and friends to draw on, and more likely to withdraw when their expectations are not met (Charlton et al. 2006).

T8 claimed she could identify students who did not have parental support available to them, attributing this situation in part to the students ‘background’. T8 stated,

*“certainly we know that some [NWU students] have access to resources that others don’t”* then added *“some of them will be helped by parents or siblings”*.

T14 talked of students who *“when they are struggling with some of the work, have a parent they can show it to”* and who can *“go home and talk about placements or volunteering”*. The same tutor recalled an occasion where a student struggling with the transition back into HE

following a year's industrial placement eventually decided, with the support of his parents during this difficult time, to continue his studies. The financial realities of attending university, which can be quite bleak for students from less advantaged backgrounds Cooke et al. (2004), can incite hostility from parents (Callendar, 2003) rather than encouraging the emotional support from family required to help the student to succeed (Christie et al. 2001). While few of the tutors interviewed acknowledged the potential impact of family support, limited social support networks are identified by Christie et al. (2004) as a factor in the student decision to withdraw.

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to choose a university where they feel similar to other students enrolled there (Forsyth and Furlong, 2003). It is important that a diverse student body on the same learning journey feels a sense of cohort and togetherness Markwell (2007). This may be a way of reducing any cultural differences that can present barriers to engagement in particular for non-traditional students (Thomas, 2002).

Mentioned in a small number of interviews was the notion of cultural capital, a proxy for parental education according to Bordieu (1977) and various others including Robinson and Garnier (1985) and Jonsson (1987 in Sullivan 2001). Variables such as parent education level and access to stimulating environments are related to the ability of the individual student (Bainbridge and Lasley, 2002). The effects of cultural capital are evident in varying degrees at NWU according to T5 who commented,

*".....I don't know whether it's necessarily age, but some students come in at 18 with wiser heads on their shoulders and I think perhaps that's got to do with cultural capital."*

Recalling what he described as a rather modest upbringing T17 identified an 'inner ethic' inherited from his parents that drove him to do well.

In Vignette 2, T3 contrasts the levels of cultural capital he witnessed at NWU with those he witnessed as a tutor at a Russell Group university.

### ***Vignette 2 Cultural capital (T3)***

*"While I was [teaching at a Russell Group university], and this is definitely the case when you talk about some of the elite institutions, the kids who go there are sometimes from privileged backgrounds. I had a student whose father was head of [an MNE], [and] globalisation wasn't a word he had heard for the first time at university. He had friends, [and] the parents had friends that did this and that and talked about investments here and investments there. The guy [...] didn't need to be taught any of the basics. He already had that growing up, from 18 years of experience [...] in just living it. And there were other students from similar types of backgrounds that had travelled, they had done a gap year and [...] came to the table with an experience of the globe, of globalisation, of development.... They might have talked about football, but there were other things going on. There was a level of discourse that was commensurate with the level of writing in academic text books and journal articles.*

*I am aware that the students who come to our programme aren't necessarily from these privileged backgrounds. You can just see it, hear it in the way they talk, when you ask them questions about certain things some of them don't know that certain things are going on in the world or whatever and ok that's fine and it's not a judgement at all you know."*

The experience recounted in Vignette 2 provides a non-judgemental view of the seemingly advantageous position in relation to study one's personal circumstances can afford. This illustrates the challenges less advantaged students face and the challenges faced by those who teach them. These challenges could be framed as compensating for the cultural capital they lack or alternatively the need to recognise and value different kinds of cultural capital all of us inevitably own.

The acknowledgement of differences in cultural capital, albeit by a small number of tutors, could potentially pave the way at NWU for the removal of any inefficiencies in pedagogic transmission (Bourdieu 1977) and the recognition and valuing of what Yosso (2005) refers to as 'outsider knowledge' and characterises as 'community cultural wealth'.

Although students from poorer backgrounds are more likely to withdraw prior to the end of the first year (Christie et al. 2004) positive outcomes for the student can be achieved through

assimilation or adaptation processes aimed at ameliorating and bridging any differences between the perceptions of the student and the institution (Walsh et al. 2009). Reflecting on the ways in which NWA manages its' students early HE experience T8 commented on the difficulties posed by the sheer numbers of students recruited. T8 called for a more meaningful way than alphabetical order to organise students into tutorial groups, though did not offer any alternatives. Smaller groups according to T8 would probably make students feel *"less like a number"* and would help them in their transition to HE from schools and colleges where many students had been *"quite cossetted"*.

Although a students' pre-HE experiences can potentially affect their intrinsic motivations to understand university level learning (Stefani, 2008), there is limited evidence in the interviews conducted for this study, of institutional attempts to understand this. Whilst NWU has a programme of outreach activities, the interviews conducted indicate limited awareness of it. The stated aim of one particular project undertaken by the NWU Learning and Teaching Team (LTT) was to address the question "What can staff learn from a situated study of the prior educational experience of students?" The findings from this project have not been widely communicated, but are available on the LTT web pages for those who care to look for them. In fact, Very few tutors talked about the influence of a student's previous educational experience, aspects of which can be significantly different to what they experience at NWU. Two of the tutors interviewed are involved in high school governance (T1 is a parent governor and T10 a governor) but in both cases, this is a personal rather than an institutional-level undertaking. Whilst T10 did not discuss this experience, T1 stated

*"I didn't really know what was taught in school, I didn't realise how different university teaching was to the way you're taught in school" then added "I go and sit in on their sessions and see how they're taught, they've got me teaching on the modules and so I'm far better prepared now for undergraduate teaching than I was".*

The following rather poignant comment from T5 reflects sentiments many tutors will no doubt identify with.

*"Actually who are our students when they come in? When was the last time any of us went and looked at a Business Studies 'A' Level syllabus?"*



The previous comments, and logic, suggests a more informed understanding of students' teaching experience in schools and colleges would benefit all tutors, particularly those teaching first year undergraduates. Reflecting on the challenge facing tutors T2 opined,

*"students in many areas don't come with the expectation that they've got to read and articulate and argue...they perhaps haven't had it at school and it just doesn't feature on their horizons....but an important part of higher education used to be [that] it wasn't just about writing, it's always been about discussing, arguing, conversation".*

Referring to international students specifically, T2 added,

*"Some overseas students have been used to rote learning, [taking] notes and regurgitating, and we have a totally different expectation which many of them don't grasp until they're several months into the programme."*

This difference according to T2 is something we should probably address, but have not addressed in more detail during induction. T4 proposed diagnostic testing to establish the skills students arrive with then added, *"there's no point in delivering loads of teaching if it's not even landing cos we haven't bothered assessing the skill base"*.

#### **4.3.2.2 Student 'lifeload'**

A minority of tutors referred to what is described in the Kahu (2013) framework as the student's 'lifeload'. Among the few tutors that did, there was a view that *"external pressures"*, for example from family or friends, were among the reason why students come to university. Referring specifically to accountancy, T17 noted that course choice was often influenced by parents and friends already in the profession rather than *"a natural love for the subject"*. T4 suggested that university was seen by students as *"part of a process to get them to the next stage in their lives"*. More important was the prevalent view that in some instances *"maybe university is not for them"*. Reflecting on the pressures and distractions those new to university face T2 commented,

*"... you have so many other things going on in your young life, all your drinking or your away from home or you're [at university because your] mum and dad said you should get a degree or there's nothing else out there for you so you've got to go and do a degree... a lot of them haven't really figured out why they want to be here."*

Acknowledging there are many 'lifeload' reasons that can affect attendance T5 commented,

*“You can have a student who’s fabulously engaged with the material but doesn’t turn up because they’ve got caring responsibilities or actually just a job that pays them more money...”*

T8 suggest that those who were not facing some form of external pressure were in the minority within the student population. Referring to unanticipated pressures T8 added

*“Whether it’s a new part-time job or something that is happening at home, or they get ill, or they get a new boy/girlfriend, even though they’re normally quite reliable, something goes wrong.”*

Recalling a survey some years ago of first year students 4-5 weeks into their first year at NWU T8 noted students reported finding it difficult to sort themselves out and to get on with the work they had been given.

There is limited awareness among participants of the lifeload issues students face. The nature and potential influence of these pressures suggest there is a need for a deeper understanding of individual student’s situations among those seeking to support them during their student journey.

#### **4.3.3 Section summary**

Tutors do not know who their students are or where they come from so unless they are told by the university or the students they will not be in a position to accommodate all of their students’ needs. They do not have access to the data on individual students and often do not have occasion to speak to the students individually.

The bleak reality in the findings of the present study is that very few tutors acknowledged that these kinds of experiences might be at the root of some of the retention, attainment and progressions problems NWU continue to experience on some of their programmes.

Institutional government policy responses rather than the policies themselves for example larger class sizes to accommodate higher student numbers and conflict in research and teaching commitments resulting from the need to meet government research funding criteria. The nature and impact of the policies rather than the rationale appear to be more of a concern for tutors.

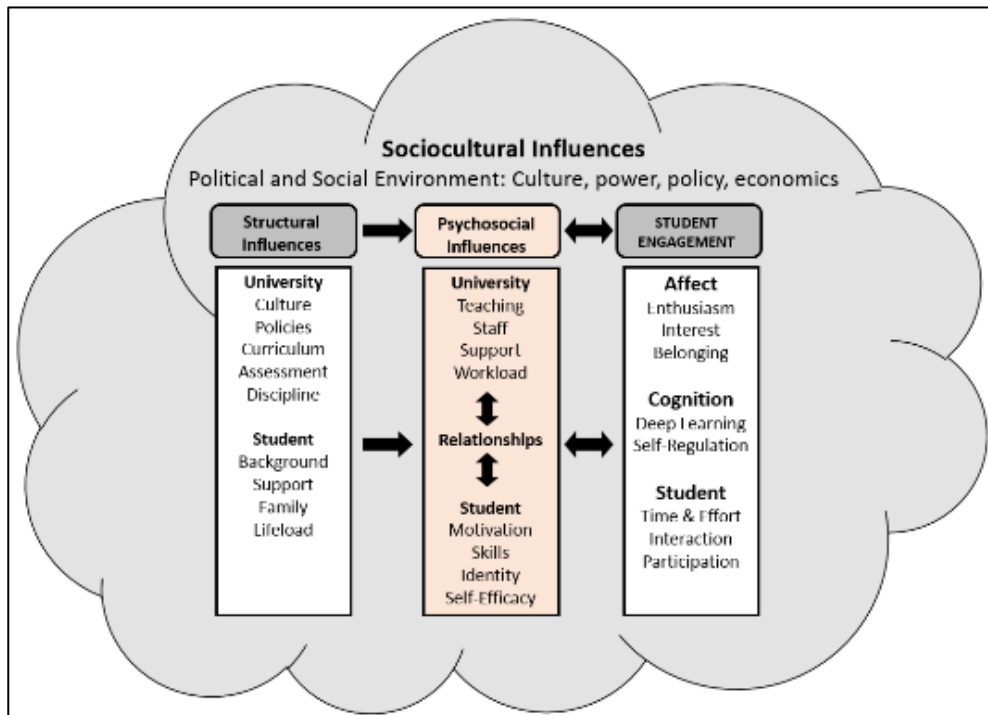
A number of tutors express concerns about the imposition of policies and procedures rather than the implementation of policies and procedures designed with their input. A recurring sentiment in the interviews is that the rationale for many institutional policies and procedures is the protection of the institution's finances and/or reputation rather than the improvement of the student experience.

Attendance is featured in most definitions and measures and often treated a synonymous with engagement. Many HEIs have introduced attendance policies though enforcement differs. The moral and philosophical grounds for mandatory attendance are unclear in post-compulsory education where students are now essentially fee-paying customers. Availability of online resources weakens the mandatory attendance argument. The link between attendance and attainment is not conclusive.

Attainment and progression are institutional measures by which programmes and departments are judged within NWU. The same measures are the basis of external judgements on NWU but there is limited recognition of this in the interviews conducted for this study. The costs associated with HE study have made attainment an even more important measure. Although teaching is a key influence on assessment attainment, other influences include the student's own input and the calibre of the student. This is determined to a certain degree by the programme entry requirements set by the institution.

#### **4.4 Psychosocial influences**

The psychosocial influences of SE (see Figure 9) according to Kahu (2013) derive from the teaching arrangements at the institution, the student's emotional and mental states and their actual and self-assessed skills, and the bi-directional student-tutor and student-institution relationships.



**Figure 9 Psychosocial influences (Kahu, 2013)**

#### **4.4.1 University psychosocial influences**

The psychosocial university influences in the Kahu (2013) framework focus on the teaching, and support the students receive from the university, the staff responsible for its design and delivery and the resulting student workload. In this study the psychosocial university influences are considered in the context of the tutor and thus indirectly on SE. Discussed in this section therefore are tutor responsibilities for the design and delivery of teaching and learning resources and the tutor workload this forms part of, along with the continuing professional development (CPD) and support NWU offer individuals with an academic tutor role.

##### **4.4.1.1 Teaching delivered**

An apparent consensus in the literature (see for example Ramsden, 2003; Voss and Gruber, 2006) is that to be effective there needs to be teacher interest and expertise in the subject, conveyed through the differentiated yet inclusive communication in logically structured sessions of intellectually challenging and appropriate course content. Openness to and encouraging of student suggestions, criticism, control and active engagement in the classroom are also important (Ramsden, 2003; Voss and Gruber, 2006). The student feedback

NWU collect invariably includes feedback on tutors who recognise the importance to students of the characteristics and behaviours to which Ramsden (2003), and Voss and Gruber (2006) refer. The teaching related comments in the interviews conducted include a noticeable number of references to student interest. The apparent assumption is that if the tutor is imparting relevant, interesting information in an interesting way, students will be (more) interested and (more) likely to attend. T5 suggested a more general approach to teaching in which

*“you make the teaching great, and you make the subject matter relevant to potential employment, to the broader social context and that’s kind of about as much as we can do”,*

then offered a potential mantra,

“Teach well, teach relevant”. (T5)

The need for tutors to take responsibility for their teaching, reflect on their practice and take steps to develop and enhance their skills and delivery is explicit in a number of interviews. T20 highlighted how important it was to *“keep looking at what you do, keep examining it and thinking, can we do it better, are there better ways of doing it”*. T4 described a new approach to teaching aimed at improving the experience of students on a programme that had received poor NSS feedback. A prerequisite of the new teaching approach design was an examination and reflection of the old teaching approach.

Drawing on personal experience T5 commented

*“I’ve got better at looking at the different ways that I teach and I know that I’ve spent a fair chunk of time trying to improve and to be reflective about the way that I teach, to look at how I might do it differently....and I think that there are a lot of good colleagues who do that”.*

T7 however cautioned against changing too many variables in any attempts to address perceived problems in teaching.

T4 and T5 called for further encouragement for tutors to engage in teaching related continuing professional development. This is particularly important given the changing nature and range of teaching skills required to accommodate the varying ability, interest and motivation evident in the classroom (Mulryan-Kyne 2010). Although teaching practice is

resistant to change (Finn et al. 2003), the tutor must provide a course that engages their students' attention, and encourages student engagement with the course content (McGroarty et al. 2004). Creative, more active forms of teaching and learning rather than 'traditional' forms (e.g. the lecture) might offer ways to facilitate interaction and meaningful learning on large undergraduate courses (McGroarty et al. 2004; Mulryan-Kyne, 2010). T15's comment below substantiates these findings.

*"When you're just sitting and you're trying to plan these things out and you think oh I've got these 40 students for an hour and a half, it's really difficult to try and come up with something. And we always fall back to the same thing's don't we? Case study, read this textbook, do this pre-work, it's all about PowerPoint. You wouldn't even think of going into a class without a PowerPoint would you? It's a cultural thing, it's become engrained, so we just have these ways of doing it."* (T15).

A change in mind-set to deal with the discomfort and anxiety that is often associated with change will likely require additional time and resources. Expressing the view that most NWU tutors would agree with her position, T5 commented,

*"...we would always be nervous about getting into the classroom and thinking we've not got enough material to cover an hour and 50 minutes, so we make sure we've got our content prepped. I think we also spend much less time thinking how we're going to deliver that, how we're going to make that engaging or challenging for different people. How are we going to ensure that those that do understand it, we understand that they understand it quickly, and they can move onto something else. I think a lot of that is because we are not necessarily professional teachers. A number of us will have done the PGCap or PGCE's or whatever, but actually putting that into practice on a daily basis is actually quite a hard thing to do, to find the time to do it and to keep pushing yourself to do it, when actually for a lot of us it's the content. We have to get the content across to them because if we don't they're not going to pass. So content, or preparing the content becomes our primary activity prior to the term starting and then on a weekly basis."*

The previous comments echo Bonwell and Eison's (1991) suggestion of reluctance amongst academic tutors to engage in instructional change due to the risks involved. There is also evidence in the tutor comments that absence of the necessary skills is a barrier to engagement with instructional change (Bonwell and Eison, 1991).

When asked where her teaching related ideas came from T15 explained that they came from reading, *“engaging with the world in some way”* and through CPD, which was where she felt there were opportunities to engage with other tutors.

Describing her utopia T15 said,

*“We’d all get together and we’d inspire each other and we’d be publishing all the time which is not really happening for me at least, and you draw links from the research that you’re doing and your engagement with the world. Then through your inspiration, you inspire the students to become engaged. But it can’t happen in our institutional framework I don’t think. I’m sure it happens somewhere. I bet it happens at Oxford”*

Reflecting on a personal belief that a large cohort was sometimes used as an excuse for tutor inaction T11 commented *“they’ve got a lot of students but I think[.....]it’s the excuse for not doing a lot of things”*.

Calls for ‘the best tutors’ to be given first and final year teaching are common within the faculty. An instinctive explanation for this is that first years need guidance on how to develop the good study habits (mentioned in the interviews) they will need to support their learning throughout the programme, and final years are the source of the NSS data on which publicly available student attainment and satisfaction measures are based. T10 opined, *“level 4 needs to be more entertaining and fun and driving engagement, yes, making them want to be there”*. T1, a parent-governor at his daughter’s school, suggests that knowledge of how students are taught in schools and colleges might inform the design and delivery of more appropriate teaching at the institution.

A number of tutors with teaching responsibilities across the different years of the course question whether in fact it becomes easier to interest students as they progress towards the final year. T16 questioned whether the high levels of engagement witnessed on her unit was attributable to the teaching or *“the fact that it’s their final year”*.

The current teaching model at the institution (discussed in section 1.2.2) under which students study four thirty-credit units in each year of the programme and, generally, are assessed once in term one and once in term 2 features in a most of the interviews. T2 suggested the reduced number of units has increased the size of the teaching teams but

usefully introduced a level of stability within teaching teams and the individual tutor teaching portfolio. On a less positive note, T9 suggested this teaching model constrains his teaching.

*"In an ideal world I would probably have a quiz at the end of each tutorial as their assessment, or have far more frequent assessments, and shorter ones.....but we can't do that, we're not allowed to do that". (T9)*

The perceived need for more assessment is shared by half the tutors interviewed, who view assessment as driving student engagement in various ways. T8 noted that without assessments students *"can very easily become turned off and complacent [because] nobody is ever putting them on the spot"*. Success in an assessment can increase a student's confidence and encourage further engagement with their studies according to T3 tutor who also talked of students who appeared to be encouraged to engage by the successful assessment outcomes of their peers. However, there is recognition amongst these tutors that more assessment has resource implications. T2 commented, *"I think [more assessment] would drive some students to do more but I don't see how we can resource it."* The regular formative assessment referred to in the T9 comment above, would also present the institution with resourcing issues.

As a student progresses at varying speeds through their individual learning journey their views and expectations of teachers change allowing for potential disjuncture between their own and the teacher's sense making particularly in the earlier stages of the journey (Perry, 1985). Around half the tutors interviewed, three with responsibilities for, and personal interest in student engagement and learning, comment on the importance of tutors and students understanding each other's expectations at the start of the student journey and at each stage within it. This includes for example the start of an academic year, the start of a unit and the beginning of a teaching session. As noted by Cook (2008 in Walsh et al. 2009) first year students often cite conflicting course and student expectations on entry as the reason for leaving university. T16 and T18 both suggest that tutor expectations of students are sometimes unrealistic due to a lack of understanding on the part of the tutor. T5 commented

*"I think we are not clear about our expectations of behaviour, our expectations of reading, [.....] the way we verbalise our expectations to students is very poor".*

On a similar point T2 observed



*“students don’t come with the expectation that they’ve got to read and articulate and argue.....higher education isn’t just about writing, it’s always been about discussing, arguing, conversation..... if they are going to take part in higher education then there should be an expectation that we all try and develop some of their debating arguing conversational skills”.*

These comments indicate an appreciation of the importance of communicating, particularly to first year students the purpose and relevance of what takes place in lectures and tutorials, and how this happens (van der Meer, 2012). On a less positive note the comments also suggest that what students will ‘just’ understand” (van der Meer, 2012:89) is often assumed and that more focus on the first year students’ ‘academic socialisation’ (Brawer, 1996) and “enculturation into the life and practices of the university” (Katanis, 2000b:103) is needed.

Referring to a particular unit they taught on, T11 described the agreement established with students at the start of the academic explaining,

*“if [there is] a set of markers that [we are going to] judge them against, they have to know that from the beginning and whether or not they like it, that’s what it is”.*

Perry (1985) advises tutors to resist the temptation to address in their teaching the needs of the more responsive students at the expense of the less responsive who may consequently “feel they are outsiders to the enterprise” (p11). As evidenced below, the tendency at NWU to follow this advice is a cause for concern amongst some of the tutors interviewed.

Commenting on classroom difficulties associated with student preparation T6 stated that students who had prepared would have

*“already [read or] thought about the questions and come to a conclusion” whereas those “who [.....] haven’t read the previous weeks resources or don’t understand it [....] won’t really participate in the debate”.*

T5 articulated a recurring theme in most of the interviews, and in the day-to-day teaching at NWU, where a tutor’s teaching approach and methods are not consistent with their expressed expectations. The students are told,

*“you’re independent learners, this is university, its different from school, we’re expecting you to do ‘x-number’ hours reading [each week] on top of [the taught sessions], it’s your responsibility blah blah blah, and then we get into the session and we spoon feed, spoon feed, spoon feed” (T5).*

References to ‘spoon feeding’ feature in comments relating to the perceived tendency to discourage students from “*muddling through*” and “*learning for themselves*” (T5). T8 for example commented,

*“I think one of the big problems we have is getting students to realise that they aren’t going to get a working knowledge of anything unless they get in a tangle and a mess and they sort of decode it”.*

Referring to the wealth of teaching related information tutors are required to provide (programme, year of study and unit handbooks for example), T20 questioned whether students

*“ever look at the unit handbooks.....I’m not sure they do. So perhaps it comes back to the fact that we’re spoon feeding them too much”.*

Reflecting on personal experience T15 recalled as a politics student having to find out about an issue that was to be debated in class. Comparing this to the experience at NWU T15 observed that it was not about providing students with a list of things they had to read and giving them lecture slides that they regurgitated back, it was actually getting out into the field and doing the research. The role of the tutor in that context was checking the learning and running the debate. An additional benefit of this approach according to T15 is that the tutor can learn alongside the students, one of Ramsden’s (2003) principles of effective university teaching.

There are differing views evident in tutor responses about what constitutes appropriate teaching approaches often with limited consideration of the stage in the journey the students have reached. As evidenced elsewhere in this chapter however, tutors are conscious of the changing attitudes to study of many students as they progress through their programme of study. It is unclear in the interviews whether the tutors perceive there to be any causal relationship between their teaching and the students’ levels of engagement. T2 is emphatic about the importance of

*“retaining the notion that part of higher education is about is oral articulation, argument, debate, conversation as much as it is about writing an assignment”.*

It is difficult to disagree with T2’s view that people’s passions are engaged when they are articulating a point of view to which they are emotionally committed but, T15 suggests, to

enable students to do this we must equip them with the skills to engage with the relevant materials. T15 also expresses a view, though not one apparent amongst the other tutors interviewed, that there is a tendency on the larger business programmes to deliver content, such as traditional theories, that is more easily absorbed than more contentious or controversial issues that are better accommodated on smaller programmes with smaller class sizes.

Almost half the tutors interviewed allude to the importance of differing types of tutor support in student learning. This includes individual academic support inside and outside of the classroom, relating to independent study, in-class activities and unit assessments. Academic support for students transitioning between years of the programme is also important. More than half the tutors interviewed allude to the need to provide students with clear, consistent and continuing guidance on the work they are required to undertake, why they are required to undertake it and how they might go about undertaking it. Tutors recognise the need to convey to students the need to engage with their studies and the benefits this can accrue. Reflecting on past performance and the feedback on assessments that is provided is also seen as important although T9 suggests student and tutor expectations of feedback can differ.

Many participants allude to the effects of a tutor's teaching ability (rather than expertise) on student engagement and attendance in class. T2, T9 and T10 suggest that presentation skills rather than expertise influence the nature of student feedback and determine the size of the audience. T9 also suggests CPD might not be the answer. *"I always use the example of a stand-up comedian.....they stand up and they tell jokes. You can learn those jokes but it doesn't make you funny.... It's an XFactor ... So I'm not sure that attending these [CPD] courses makes much difference"* (T9).

T2 expresses the view that

*"knowing what your strengths and weaknesses are is something that makes you a better teacher....personality is a big factor in teaching and engagement.....some people are good at the art of making a lecture interactive.....that's a skill I've never developed.....I've always preferred to do the straight down the line lecture, you know, come in, talk about your subject".*

Vignette 3 encapsulates the widely shared views and concerns among the tutors interviewed about what students expect from them and lends weight to Voss and Gruber's (2006) findings that students want tutors to be entertaining, humorous, funny.

### ***Vignette 3 Reflections on the role of the tutor (T5)***

*Actually, it would be very easy for me to teach on a first year unit and go into a lecture theatre with 200 students, jazz hands, tell a great story, be really engaging as a performer. The student feedback would probably be really good, attendance would really, really good, people would hand in their assignments in on time [.....] I know I could do that because I can do the jazz hands and I can be the engaging tutor but would they learn anything? They probably would and if you get them in the room at least they're, they're listening.*

*If I wasn't an engaging tutor and I stood at the front of the lecture theatre, and was particularly difficult to understand, or wasn't particularly engaging, just read the things from the slides.....that first week they're in the room, the next week there's fewer of them in the room. But if the materials are still on line, as long as they are reading the material, are they engaging any less? According to our statistics, they are engaging less. So actually the material maybe the same, my knowledge may be the same but the fact that I can do jazz hands and another tutor can't or chooses not to, does that make me better at engagement or does it mean I just happen to have an A level in theatre studies and quite like it.*

*My view has always been that I don't care if [students] like me, I care if they learn, and if they remember something, not me, not lovely me... if they remember something I've taught them 5, 10, 15 years from now, then I've done a good job. If they are out in industry and they put something into practice they learned with me then I have done a good job. My proudest thing now is not the students who have just graduated but the ones that graduated 3, 4, 5 years ago and who contact me for a reference or send me a message asking for advice on a piece of work that they're doing. That to me means that I have engaged those students, I have engaged them in the learning and the process... it's not about people turning up because you're good fun.*

T17 whose feedback from first year students is consistently excellent attributes his popularity to his industry experience. *"I think because I've done the job day in and day out and I can bring real world experience....they love that sort of thing"* (T17). T17 also suggests that the awareness of the students of his continued involvement within his industry in particular his role as an examiner encourages students to listen to him. This last point is picked up by T16 who commented

*"I think unless you have that conversation with them then they're not aware of [the external work you are involved in]".*

There is perhaps a case for tutors to establish a dialogue with students so they understand the value the tutor is actually adding to their learning. The question of what constitutes real-world credibility is an interesting one and the answer is perhaps more straightforward for an accountant teaching accountancy. However, what does credibility in the 'real world' mean in relation to career academics? Is credibility derived from academic qualifications or publications?

The quality of the teaching and learning resources, particularly the appropriateness of the challenges they present, featured in the large majority of the interviews conducted. T9 expressed personal reservations about a common practice in the Business School whereby tutors are told which topics will feature on the examination paper.

*"if we really cared, we would tell them nothing at all about the exam....no past papers, nothing in tutorials, and tell them at the end of the year there'll be a 3 hour exam in which you will answer X essay questions and it could be on anything. Then they might engage a bit more. I think exams are ok but there's not much point having an exam if you are going to tell them what the questions are".*

In T9s comment there is a suggestion that the detailed guidance provided does not encourage engagement. A similar suggestion is evident in the comment below taken from a discussion with T1 which took place many months after the original interview.

*"We gave students a pre-seen exam...three days before the exam they were given a copy of the exam paper on Moodle...when I checked on the day of the exam, eleven students had not bothered to look at the questions. We gave them the questions in advance. Seriously, what more can we do?"*

Five tutors emphasised the need to engender students' interest in the subject through their teaching. T5 also suggested tutors passion and knowledge would inspire students and this view is substantiated in student feedback.

Many tutors acknowledge the need for their teaching to accommodate varying levels of student ability. The range of student ability within large groups was identified as a particular problem. T2 suggested that differentiation in the classroom is *"an unexamined area"*. The perceived impact of not catering for mixed ability is encapsulated in T8's observation that *"if*

*you are pitching to an average [in a class of] 35, you can have 20 for whom it really isn't relevant."* T8 also noted,

*"we don't do anything to [...] stream people.....we just group people on surnames and the more we've got in numbers, the more you're going to have people who think 'this isn't right for me...so the numbers don't help at all."*

T2 is the only tutor to explicitly emphasise the need for a developmental approach to learning throughout a programme of study, effectively treating it as a learning journey. This comment chimes with Perry's (1985) observation that teaching needs to be appropriate for the stage of the learning journey the student has reached. Raising concerns over one of the programmes he is responsible for T2 commented, *"the stuff they were teaching first years was the same stuff they were teaching level 6"* which according to T2 left students without the necessary subject knowledge that underpins the more strategic, or analytical issues.

#### **4.4.1.2 Training and Development**

The psychosocial influences that originate at the level of the university involve administrative as well as academic staff from across the university who are involved in many aspects of the student's experience on their higher education journey. The 2008 Select Committee on Public Accounts report highlighted the importance of universities offering the increasing numbers of students entering higher education access to tutors tasked with providing pastoral and (additional) academic support. As is the case in many other universities (Walsh et al. 2009), NWA has introduced a core of student support systems involving academics, administrative staff, and specialist support including counselling, medical care, careers advice and guidance alongside student-led services such as the student union. The perceived effectiveness of the complementary and incorporated components of the total learning environment (Buultjens and Robinson, 2011) that these systems provide has a significant influence on the student's experience and reported satisfaction. It is important therefore that NWA offer the staff involved, appropriate development and support.

The nature and level of support and development provided for tutors by NWU feature in most of the interviews conducted for this study. Referring to the perceived impact of these support systems T14 claimed that NWU had created posts to deliver aspects of the academic tutor role where the tutors were deemed to have underperformed. T14 expressed the view that

clarification of the tutor role more generally was required as well as a broader discussion on what constitutes appropriate institutional support for tutors, noting, “...the key people in front of [students] day by day are in effect the tutors”.

Although (Browne, 2010) suggested that HE teaching staff qualifications would become a factor influencing student choice, it is not clear which particular qualifications this statement is referring to. Despite claims by Gibbs and Coffey (2004) and (Spowart et al. 2016) that formal training is a key component of learning and teaching enhancement, the link remains unproven Trowler and Bamber (2005), with little evidential support in the literature (Gibbs, 2010). Whilst NWA encourages academic tutors to engage with The Higher Education Academy (HEA) professional recognition (for example Fellowship of the HEA), the credibility of HEA qualifications is questioned by colleagues across the institution. It seems reasonable to suggest that NWA’s view of accreditation under the UK Professional Standards Framework (PSF) is that it leads to improvements in teaching and enhanced student learning. However, accreditation is normally aimed at established tutors (See for example Parsons and Taylor, 2011; Spowart et al. 2016). Whilst Spowart et al. (2016) found that those working within professional bodies aligned to disciplines such as Law and Accounting, placed more value on their professional body recognition than on HEA accreditation, there was nothing explicit in the interviews conducted in this study to suggest this is the case at NWU. NWU also offer in-house Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and training, and PhD funding for academic tutors. The following comments illustrate a range of views on CPD and training offered. T15 noted that as far as CPD was concerned,

*“...there’s not a lot of that cos there’s not a lot of time to do that. So again, that comes back down to resources. I’m doing a PGCAP and I’m loving it because when you sit in a room with Art teachers, Science teachers, they’ve got so many ideas and then you get inspiration. But then you come back to your room and it’s people knocking on the door and you’ve got this paperwork to fill in and you’ve got all these different things to do. It’s gone.”*

T6 who clearly wanted feedback and support to develop and improve his teaching practice. He expressed disappointment at the lack of feedback particularly following observations of his teaching. Furthermore T6 suggested the micro-teaching session he teaching was required to design and deliver were not authentic. This limited the value of any feedback he did receive. ,

There was nothing identified in the interviews to suggest that workgroup cultures within departments operate against innovation, or hinder the transfer learning back into departments (Trowler and Bamber, 2005). Disciplinary teaching conventions were not mentioned although anecdotal evidence and timetabling conventions at NWU indicate that disciplines generally adopt particular teaching session and assessment session formats (e.g. 1-hour lecture plus 2-hour tutorial for business, 2-hour lecture plus 1-hour tutorial for economics etc.). NWU tutors design the content of the teaching sessions within these constraints.

Whilst the frequency and timing of assessments at NWU are constrained at the institutional level, Vignette 4 illustrates how different and more innovative approaches to assessment can be adopted within these constraints.

Whilst Trowler and Bamber (2005) caution that 'methodological individualism' does not lead to institutional change, it can be argued that it is where institutional change takes root. Methodological individualism such as that illustrated in Vignette 4 could be the creative destruction that is key to keeping teaching approaches fresh and relevant in the contemporary 'classroom'. The issue then, is how to keep academic tutors up to speed with the innovation in teaching that is going on within the institution, in the different faculties and departments, providing tutors with appropriate settings and spaces in which to share knowledge, experience and experiences. This applies equally across the HE sector.

Trowler and Bamber (2005) challenge the assumption that individual change, resulting from institutional training policies designed to enhance teaching and learning, automatically leads to systemic change, arguing that other things need to be in place. The experiences shared by the NWU tutors interviewed appear to offer support for this position. A university does not become a learning organisation simply because it employs reflective practitioners (Kim, 1993). There needs, for example, to be a consensus within the institution about what reflective practice is, and reflective practitioners need the necessary power to change things.



#### **Vignette 4 Creative methods of assessment (T7)**

*In the assignment, students have to come up with a business idea and then design it. So in previous years some of them have just come up with really boring stuff that kind of....eBay, phone shops, meals for students, and you kind of see the same ideas again and again and you know that they're not really engaging with thinking about what the business could be. But other students do think about it and they ask questions. They'll come up with an idea and say 'is this good enough? Is this going to fit with the assignment?', but also, 'could it work?', 'what are the problems with it?', They may predict a problem and ask if that's ok, and from an academic point of view, you say 'well the business idea has a problem but that's fine because it gives you something to discuss'. So for some students their anxiety is evidence that they're actually engaged with it, they've got an idea, they're reflecting on that idea, they're seeing problems with it, they're bringing those problems to the tutor.*

*Other students are instrumental, entirely focussed on what will get them the most marks in the assignment and they get very frustrated when you say, 'well I can't tell you', here's the brief, you've got the brief, we've both got the brief, you need to put something into that to be able to get a good mark and I can't tell you what that is, it's your assignment.' The types of assignment I set are deliberately designed so that they have to engage. I avoid exams. I usually give as much freedom with the choice of the assignment as I can, so for instance, we could have had a case study about an existing business but I give them the responsibility of choosing a business so that they have to think, well what is the demand, who would be the customers? And it's not me saying you're a gardening business, come up with a website design, because it's their idea, and it's something they're interested in and their associated with, so hopefully they've got more insight and they're more inclined to think about it. In the past, we've had students looking at martial arts. That's what they do in their spare time so maybe they'll come up with a martial art's oriented business. So it flows over then between their academic life and their life outside university. If you give them a case study, it actually stops them asking a load of questions because the possibilities are limited. You've given them the case and then they've only got certain channels they can ask about otherwise it falls outside the brief.*

*I've also looked at student ownership of format. So for one assignment they'd run an experiment, which might be 10 people using a particular website or a particular piece of equipment, and they videoed them doing it, or they could wrote up what happened. One of the things that came out of this approach when I first started doing it was that it helped people with dyslexia and also students whose written English wasn't so hot because they weren't writing, they could speak to the camera. The video is still a bit of a problem with overseas students who don't speak very clearly, but again it's all about offering the flexibility to choose a method that suits them best, that they can engage with more.*

*I started this when I was final year dissertation tutor and the students were all complaining about the amount they'd got to write. So I thought if we let them do it by video we could relieve this boredom. I talked to colleagues and some of them said it was a bit risky and that I'd need minor mods etc., so I gave the students the choice. They could either write it or do it by video, and one of the interesting things that came out of the analysis was that the students who'd scored better on the first assignment that had to be written tended to choose the video and they were getting a little bit more in the way of marks. The very poor students tended not to do video and the hypothesis, which I've not tested, is that they didn't feel confident enough to take the risk. They were just getting by, borderline, on the stuff that they could do. They didn't want to take the risk of doing new stuff. I think they were effectively locked into methods which made them perform poorly but that they were comfortable with and they weren't prepared to take that risk, whereas the better students who were doing ok gave it a go.*

Whilst Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is deemed important by half the tutors interviewed, the following quotes from two tutors involved in teaching and programme management suggest it is not something the institution is particularly good at.

*"We don't have a culture of supporting professional development in terms of our daily practice. We have a culture of maybe sending people off to a conference, maybe funding or letting them do a PhD". (T4)*

*"...what a labyrinth marking is, or setting assignments, I mean the learning outcomes....no one trains you, we are very, very poor". (T2)*

There is an apparent view among the participants that unless CPD is authentic and supportive it will not be seen in a positive light by tutors. For example, T4 blames the absence of *"a model of giving positive feedback"* at the institution for the circumspect approach amongst colleagues to peer observation. Peer observation is formally encouraged at NWU, but has received a mixed response from NWU tutors. T6 recounted

*"I couldn't get anyone to sit in and listen to me and give me any feedback. For some reason most of my colleagues, I think a lot are union members, don't want to be [observed but I would] like someone sitting at the back of the room...to see what the students see and then to say well actually that was fine but you could have done this a bit better. Both times someone did attend my session, they gave me almost no feedback afterwards about what they felt so I was none the wiser really"*

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As Vignette 5 illustrates however, peer observation can be powerful if tutors engaged in the process are fully committed. T5's account demonstrates how it can encourage reflection and change in teaching practice.

### ***Vignette 5 Peer observation (T5)***

*In a recent peer observation session I watched a colleague teaching and the thing that really impressed me was his confidence to not tell them what to do, his confidence in, 'I know this activity and I know that if I give them limited instruction they will get more out of it'. Part of it is about learning as a team and questioning, so they had to work out what the task was as a team.*

*Observing him at the start, I was sitting there wanting to say '...I don't think they understand, I don't think they understand, I don't think they un.....'. It made me realise afterwards how, in our eagerness to engage, we can spoon feed. So we're in a session and it goes quiet, or they start talking about their Friday night, or they get on Facebook, and in a bid to engage them..... 'well, ok well let's look at this then, well how about thinking about this way, how about.....' and we give more, and we give more instruction and we give more content and more instruction and more content, and we actually prevent them muddling through it, learning for themselves. So we ask for independent learning and then we actually put barriers in place for them to do it. That's something I was particularly impressed with when I saw [my colleagues] practice was that actually his confidence in... 'well, what do you think you need to do?.... there's the instructions, have a chat....', and he just kept repeating the instructions that he'd given and they had to make sense of those instructions and put some meaning around them. When they presented back it was 'right this is what **we** took the activity to be, and therefore this is how we tackled it. This is what we did etc.....' and then it was, [tutor] 'ok so how have you worked as a team?' and [student] 'oh I see now why you didn't give us the instructions. Its because we worked it out'.*

*I think in terms of engagement we can over feed, because we're thinking that engagement means they're turning up and they're talking about the subject matter. It's not necessarily engagement though is it? Engagement might be that they're sat there in silence reading through something. Engagement might be that they're sat there talking about their Friday night cos they don't really know what they're doing. They might need prompting but, you know, they're in the room, there must be some level of wanting to learn so maybe over spoon feed them."*

The institution provides a programme of CPD events throughout the academic year that tutors can sign up for, though two of the tutors noted attendance amongst their peers at these events is poor. Two different tutors stated that there should be an allowance of hours for CPD on individual tutor timetables. The tendency for educational development courses to be insensitive to disciplinary differences (McGuinness, 1997) are reflected in tutor comments on the need for CPD sessions to be authentic, representative of the teaching environment the tutors are exposed to. Broadly reflecting the views of three colleagues involved in CPD at the time of the interviews T9 noted,

*"...at no point did anybody ever tell me what was a good lecture or what was a good tutorial. What does it look like, what do people do in it....it was all about....'oh we should try and engage them more.....' It was all woolly, fluffy stuff..."*

There is a consensus amongst the same tutors however, that CPD sessions provide useful opportunities to meet and speak with colleagues from across the institution.

Training in the use of university systems is identified as necessary by a number of tutors not involved in programme management and therefore less likely to be involved with these systems on a regular basis, for example the Student Records system. Training in the use of various learning resource technologies such as the advanced features of the virtual learning environment and the use of social media (the communication channel of choice for many students) more generally is also identified as necessary.

Many tutors feel the time they have to develop their teaching materials and just to talk to each other is insufficient. Touching on both concerns, T2 noted

*"it's been so difficult because of the way our teaching and teams have been structured for us to have the kind of dialogue amongst the teams as to what constitutes the appropriate level and the appropriate material.....we just don't put enough hours and effort into getting these things right"*

T2s comment suggests that in practice, a whole-programme thinking approach to programme development is not applied.

#### **4.4.1.3 Tutor workload**

The Conceptual Framework of Engagement, Antecedents and Consequences is a lens through which Kahu (2013) suggests SE can be viewed more holistically. It also provides a framework for reflecting on the impact of historic and future changes in UK HE more generally and in terms of teaching specifically. What, for example, are the teaching strategies and resources that society, the sector, the institution and students deem to be appropriate, and by who and how do they expect these to be delivered? Importantly, how is the appropriateness of teaching assured in a constantly evolving UK HE context?

In response to the question 'what is the role of the tutor in SE?' T4 replied,

*"...we have not been taught to ask that question. Historically I think the academic model has been one of the Oracle.... come and listen to what I have to say and be like me. Oh I think that's out of the window now isn't it?"*

In simple terms, an NWU tutor's workload comprises teaching, research, and administrative tasks. There is an evident perception among some of the participants in this study that research commitments take precedence over teaching, often to the detriment of teaching quality and thus the student experience. Examples of the barriers to tutor motivation and engagement a research focus creates include increasing pressures on academics to publish; deterioration in the staff-student ratio; increasing numbers of part-time associate lecturers covering the teaching of research-focussed tutors (Markwell, 2007). Doubts over the wisdom of a research rather than teaching focus (Nilsen, 2009) and support for view that teaching is less valued than research (Van Schalkwyk et al. 2015) are apparent among the NWU tutors interviewed. The following quotes were typical.

*"...the university system is stupid I think in that we all have to be everything. We don't have some people that are just doing research because they love research, and some people that love teaching and are engaged with teaching, doing mainly teaching. We're made to hit targets on research which pulls us away from teaching, which means that sometimes some people have to do teaching when really they're more into their research." (T19)*

*"In a business school you need to have a certain amount of people who are research focused, people with practitioner experience and good teachers. Good teachers don't necessarily make good researchers." (T20)*

T15 spoke for many when she said,

*"We just don't have time, it never stops. The minute you get to August you've lost the inspiration to actually do it. You might be engaging in material [relevant to your teaching] throughout your PHD and you think 'oh wouldn't it be lovely to [update all of my teaching resources]' but then you're just so worn down because of the lack of [teaching] resources that [you eventually resort to] 'ok I'll just change some of those slides'."*

NWU have adopted a policy of recruiting PhD qualified applicants to teaching posts and allocating hours on their timetables for research. Established academic tutors without a PhD are encouraged to undertake doctoral research. A number of tutors, most without a PhD at the time of the interviews, questioned the NWU rationale of requiring a PhD and considering a teaching qualification as desirable for teaching posts. In T2's view,

*“What we have to realise is that a PhD is about research and intellectual methods within a certain subject, but it’s not about teaching and if you want people to be good teachers you’ve got to put effort and enthusiasm into how do they know about pedagogy. The two things aren’t the same. Just because you know about a subject it doesn’t mean you can teach it very well”.*

Adopting a similar position T4 commented,

*“where is the communal output from somebody who spent 7 years in a library or 3 years full time in a library thinking about [and] developing their own thesis and arguments? Yes of course we need that and we need experts but if we are primarily a teaching organisation there is a disconnect. It’s a mixed message isn’t it if we say we need you to focus on student experience, we also want you to do a PhD”.*

Tutors acknowledged the impact of their teaching on student learning and student perceptions of them and the institution. T2 highlighted the need for time, effort and focus on pedagogy adding, *“that’s what increasingly students are judging us on”* and expressed frustration at tutors

*“..who are just not interested in pedagogy whatsoever”* adding *“you look at the quality of their assignments; the type of material they use on the course.....I mean they are very knowledgeable people but they’re not interested in helping the students learn or in developing the subject in a coherent way”.* (T2)

This comment adds weight to calls for the appropriate management of tutors at NWU, and touches on issues arising out of the competing priorities and demands on tutors’ time.

The monitoring and measurement of teaching performance is welcomed generally. It is also viewed as necessary by around a third of the tutors interviewed, some with and others without programme management responsibilities. A senior lecturer expressed the view that the NWU Professional Development Review (PDR) added little value. A principal lecturer and senior learning and teaching fellow expressed the view that the PDR should incorporate an element of teaching performance evaluation.

The following quote from T11, a tutor with programme management responsibilities, illustrates the problems in dealing with student feedback involving complaints about specific tutors,

*“...what we tend to do to deal with [the complaint] is to move [the tutor] off [the unit]. We don’t actually deal with the problem. We don’t make them improve*

*their material, make them be clearer, send them off on training or whatever, we just remove them from the uni... We are not normally honest saying.....'look we've had these complaints so you're not carrying on with that unit', so [the tutor] never necessarily even knows that there really is a problem."*

Four tutors emphasised the importance of allocating teaching according to the expertise and interest of the tutor. T2, a tutor with substantive teaching and programme management experience over many years at the institution, noted potential problems for tutors whose unit portfolio changes year on year.

*"...we change units and materials so often, people don't consolidate and build up their repertoire of materials. A lot of people are just using standardised textbooks or articles without thinking how they can design appropriate teaching instruments". Similarly as far as courses are concerned "if you are going to develop a good course you need to do it for some period of time, some years because then you build in incremental improvements whereas if you keep changing the courses.....everything you've developed then has to be thrown out..... there's no incentive to develop good pedagogical material."*

#### **4.4.2 Student psychosocial influences**

This section explores the motivation, skills, sense of identity and self-efficacy, that according to Kahu (2013) influence in varying degrees a student's engagement with learning. Of significance to this study is the view that motivation and self-efficacy, along with expected outcome, are engagement antecedents that a university can influence (Bandura, 1997; Linnenbrink and Pintrich, 2002; Nilsen, 2009).

##### **4.4.2.1 Motivation**

Motivation and engagement are often treated in the literature, as closely related or synonymous with engagement (Appleton et al. 2008, Markwell, 2007). Whilst T8 questioned whether there was any difference in engagement and *"the word motivation"*, many other tutors talked of students' motivation to engage being affected in positive and negative ways by various factors and feelings. T13 for example identified the motivational affects of the belief that a degree *"is what will get them places"* and the consequent taking responsibility for their own learning. Six tutors expressed the view that a goal such as a particular degree classification or a specific profession or job can motivate a student to engage in curricular and extra-curricular activities. Another tutor commented on the seemingly automatic and positive assumptions made about the ability and knowledge of first class honours students

adding that tutors need to make students aware of this. The instrumental approach to study implied here is evident in T3's comment that *"....when people realise that to get what they want they have to do certain things, they do them"*. It was suggested by some of the tutors that although a goal can encourage student engagement it does not necessarily encourage student interest. According to T8, the same applies to fear of failure. In the following extract, T10 talks of the less positive motivational effects of a particular goal.

*"...it's engagement for the goal isn't it, of getting a 2.i, but if it doesn't fit in with getting a 2.i.....the number of times you say to final year students 'I've invited a guest speaker who will be talking to you about something that should be really interesting, it's really at the cutting edge of this knowledge' [and you are asked] 'will I get an exam question on it?' [and if you say 'No'], they don't turn up."*

This attitude from students raises questions over the value students attribute to learning per se.

Related to the perceived value of study is the level of appreciation of the effort that studying requires. A second year tutor expressed frustration at student expectations that *"we will give them everything that they need in order to get a first or a 2.i"*. T3 identified the need to establish an appropriate level of expectation in the first year of study but in his experience second year student's attitudes suggested that this was not happening.

There are suggestions in the interviews conducted that students attribute a range of values to each year of study. It is not unusual to hear students, tutors and non-academic staff at the institution debating impact of the perceived value (and purpose) of the first year. The backdrop to these discussions is usually that the first year marks do not contribute to the overall degree classification awarded upon completion of the course. As T12 put it

*"I think it doesn't take long for first years to realise [they've] just got to pass [the year] and they do the calculations [....] and do the minimum"*.

According to T17,

*"certainly first year engagement can be awful I think sometimes [....] they think it's a holiday, so long as [they] get 40% they think they are sorted."*

T6 recounted similar difficulties motivating first years who believe that *"all they have to do is pass, and it doesn't matter what the grade is"*. At NWU, the results from the first year do not



contribute to the overall degree classification the student is awarded at the end of their course of study. Several tutors spoke about the adverse impact of the perception that the first year does not count towards the final degree classification. T10 commented,

*"I think [the first year] should count and I think it would help us a lot if it did" but added that "you've got to pass [the first year] because if you fail it you're out".*

T6 suggested making the first year results contribute *"say 10% of the overall degree"*.

T10 who has a wealth of first year teaching experience suggested the first year

*"needs to be more entertaining and fun, driving engagement, making them want to be there, getting into good habits of being there and engaged".*

Several tutors involved in final year teaching commented on enhanced engagement amongst the final year students, each of them commenting on effectiveness of the imminence of the final assessments (particularly examinations) and graduation as motivational forces. T6 described the third [final] year students as much easier to motivate because *"they're generally much more interested"* but claimed there are students in all levels *"who genuinely want to learn more and are interested in the subject"*. T17 observed a *"noticeable improvement in the final years"* who he said attended and participated in class *"because it actually matters to them"* either because they have matured or because they know *"this counts towards [their] degree now"*.

The heightened levels of engagement among final year students are cited amongst the reasons behind the decision in one department not to monitor final year attendance. Enhanced levels of final year engagement are also attributed by many tutors to the placement experience involving 36 weeks minimum paid employment in the third year of a four-year sandwich degree course. T17 captures the range of positive effects featured in the other tutors' comments.

*"What we have found is that people who go on placement achieve much better marks than students who haven't, because they've seen what it's all about".*

T17 added that the returning placement students understand why they are studying something specifically because they have used it or seen it used whilst on placement. Also referring to returning placement students T3 commented

*"...they have seen other people and what they've had to do in order to get to [where they are] so they know they will have to do something very similar [or] do something slightly different but [they will] have to take a series of steps".*

Performance in assessments can illicit various responses in terms of student engagement. According to T13

*"a lot of students who work extremely hard and do quite well are actually the ones who are most dissatisfied with themselves because they know that there was more that they hadn't read"*

suggesting perhaps that success can lead to a desire for even greater success. Other students' marks according to another tutor can cause lower performing students to question why their peers have outperformed them. Whether this questioning ultimately leads to higher levels of engagement amongst the lower performing students is unclear.

Three tutors pondered the effects of the subject discipline on a student's motivation to engage. One of the tutors compared business students enrolled on a course for employability reasons with a humanities student

*"...who isn't necessarily thinking about their career when they come to university but wanting to have the university experience, to enrich themselves, but also wanting to give something back to the community".*

This view of business students is also evident in the following tutor remarks;

*"I'm doing a business degree because I want a job or want a credential that is going to get me a job. I'm not terribly interested in the subject"; (T2)*

*"People want a good job. Where are good jobs? They're in business so I'll go and do a business studies degree". (T5)*

It is unclear whether this 'instrumentalism' apparent in business students encourages or discourages the engagement with the extra-curricular activities associated in the literature predominantly with employability outcomes predominantly in terms of its impact on employability (See for example Clegg et al. 2010; Thompson et al. 2013; Stevenson and Clegg, 2011; Clark et al. 2015; Stuart et al. 2011).

#### 4.4.2.2 Identity

Identity is an important factor in student learning and yet it is mentioned by only one tutor, T4, a course leader recently involved in targeted measures aimed at improving the overall experience and reported satisfaction of students on a particular NWA programme. Identity is closely related to engagement, motivation and self-efficacy, which are all key determinants of student learning (Wilson et al. 2015). Reflecting on the link between identity and SE T4 commented,

*“I guess it starts with identifying with the programme that they’ve come here to be part of, ideally identifying with the organisation……it’s all about identity I think. How do they see themselves, and coming here, does that shape and form that identity or is it seen as something that’s part of a process to get them to the next stage in their lives”.*

Acknowledgement of the influence of student identity over the extent to which a student feels they fit in to their chosen HE Institution (Reay et al. 2010) is evident in a further quote from T4.

*“I think we’re working with lots of students who don’t feel necessarily, automatically entitled to be here. They might accrue a sense of entitlement through becoming customers, because that’s a model that is available to them……when you have pounds in your pocket you have power, you have cultural capital.”*

University experience is influential in a student’s intellectual and emotional development (Kaufman, 2014). It is therefore important that students formulate as early as possible in their journey to achievement in HE, a positive student identity (Kaufman, 2014; Martin et al. 2014).

Student characteristics and background, discussed in section 2.5.3.2, can have a significant impact on university retention rates (Marsh, 2014). Indeed (Christie et al. 2004) identify lack of ‘fit’ between student and institution as a factor in the student decision to withdraw. It is therefore important that NWU, with its commitment to increasing participation of underrepresented groups in HE, acknowledges and accommodates the diverse needs of the students concerned, throughout their learning journey. As noted in section 4.2 however, it is unclear what information tutors have access to that would allow them to understand and accommodate individual student needs in their teaching. In one of very few acknowledgements of such matters, T18 stated,

*“for some students, passing a degree is a huge achievement. Perhaps we don’t recognise that enough.”*

Student perceptions of how well the institution values them and how well it responds to their needs is at the root of considerable student withdrawal according to Walsh et al. (2009). If this is true, the following response from T6 when asked about involvement in extra-curricular provision strikes a really rather depressing note.

*“I want to help students all I can, but I’ve got my research to do, and I’ve got to say, there are limits to my enthusiasm. If I really thought it would make a difference to the students, I’d probably get more involved, but I suspect if you put on extra events and no one turns up, it would make me feel even more cynical than before, you know, it would make me feel disillusioned. So it’s not necessarily a good idea. “.*

#### **4.4.2.3 Self-Efficacy**

Self-efficacy, in an academic context, is concerned with the extent to which a student believes they are competent and in control of their learning, and can therefore bolster both academic engagement and performance (Suarez-Orozco et al. 2009). Experiences of success and failure, so called performance accomplishments, are a key source of efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1997). Another source of efficacy beliefs, so called vicarious experiences, are the success or failure experiences of others, whether similar to different to the observer (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy is based on future orientated cognitive appraisals, and is therefore malleable. Despite claims of reliability in predicting university student achievement, self-efficacy was not mentioned in any of the interviews conducted for this study.

#### **4.4.2.4 Confidence**

Student confidence, which featured in many interviews conducted in this study, is not present in the Kahu (2013) framework. However, confidence is something *“we need to inculcate”* in students according to T13 who speculated

*“it’s the lack of confidence and expectation of themselves ....I can’t do it, I won’t be able to do it, I won’t get anywhere anyway, why am I bothering, I’m just going through the motions”.*

T1’s experience has convinced him that confidence is a driver of engagement particularly in the classroom,

*"I've seen it in my students at [my previous institution] and here. As they became aware... 'actually you know I'm hitting the required standard here, I'm not thick, I know what I'm talking about, I've got something to add here'".*

T8 recalled an SE related project some years ago in which first year students reported difficulties managing the workload and resorted to procrastination rather than dealing with the matter by engaging. T20's experience does not necessarily suggest a positive correlation between in-class confidence and attainment.

*"Some of the more confident students who are good at speaking out in class aren't necessarily any good at writing assignments and some of the quieter students who sit by and listen are the ones perhaps who are taking it in and taking it on board". (T20)*

The need, ultimately, for students to take ownership of, and responsibility for their own learning was noted by a number of tutors. This should happen ideally at the start of the course, and particularly given the limited contact time with tutors. This, it is suggested, will encourage students to engage with the teaching and learning. T13 noted, *"once that ownership comes, I think the motivation will follow and they will be involved"*.

#### **4.4.3 Relationships**

The inclusion of 'relationships' within the psychosocial influences lends support to the Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) view that substantive engagement is a joint teacher and student endeavour. The complex student-tutor relationship is, according to Broughan and Grantham (2012), fundamental in the development of the student as an independent learner committed to their chosen studies.

According to T7 the student-tutor relationship is about *"the personal relationship [tutors] have with the students"* and for T4 is *"bringing the human into what [tutors] do.....working out where [the tutor] can make connections and making sure that [they] do connect"*.

Tutor references to the differing attitudes and willingness amongst colleagues to develop relationships with students are captured in T2s observation that

*"Some tutors will spend time with students who are finding stuff difficult..... others will say go and learn it for yourself....it's a very variable picture when it comes to the supportive nature of the tutor."*

T2 then added,

*"I've never looked at developing a relationship if I lecture to students, I just come in give the lecture and that's it."*

In contrast, T14, who believes it is their job to nurture their students admitted

*"Some of the favourites I have are because they are the ones that engage with me.....so I will then put myself out for them."*

However, in an environment driven by metrics, establishing the agile and dynamic learning environment in which students can develop relationships with tutors and develop their knowledge of the 'rules of the game' is problematic (Broughan and Grantham, 2012).

T16 commented

*"I absolutely understand the principle behind having the office hour but I also question the impact of it. It is a subconscious or direct message that that is all [the tutor has to do] and that's completely, from my point of view that's completely unacceptable. So I always say to my students that this is my office hour but if you want to see me some other time then email me or you're very welcome to drop by but just don't be surprised if I'm not there. I think it's really hard and I think you can only manage it by being completely transparent with the students, because otherwise the feedback you'll get is that you are never available."*

Among the tutors who identified a role for student-tutor relationships in SE is a shared view that there are often too many students and insufficient time on tutor timetables to invest in developing relationships with them. Referring to her experience of interactions with students during office hours when students can drop in without an appointment T16 explained,

*"Because of the numbers involved I can afford to [spend more individual time with students]. I'm always more than happy if they come to talk to be about anything. I've got my office hours but I've always said to them if I'm in my office and I'm not looking grumpy or harassed come in and speak to me, because it's the ones who want to do well and who aren't being completely instrumental."*

Guidance for students about what office hours can offer and how to make use of this resource is recommended as a means to address the often underuse of office hours that ultimately undermines a valuable site for student success facilitating interactions (Smith et al. 2017). In the following interview extract, T19 describes the office hours experience of a tutor she shares an office with.

*"He cares so much about the students. He's very good with them and in his office hours...and he teaches on big undergraduate units where there are several tutors....he gets the students, not just from his tutorial but from other tutorials because he delivers some of the lectures, and they're queuing outside the room waiting to speak to him. Every office hour he has is full and he has said he has so much work because students come to him because he is nice and he cares and takes time with them. I don't know who the other tutors are but perhaps they're more into their research or for some reason they haven't got the time or the students just don't engage with them in the same way."*

Responses to the lack of clarity around the role of the tutor evident in T19s account are contained in the following comments, which illustrate the range of tutor perceptions of their role and the purpose of their interactions with students.

*"...we have to set expectations for them. 'We are going to do everything in our power to make sure that you get there and the rest is up to you, but along the way we will inspire you with great teaching, with massive opportunities, extra-curricular, with up to date knowledge, with research informed stuff, with guest speakers and, interesting and engaging sessions'." (T5)*

*"...it's a balance between being dictatorial and being supportive isn't it, and being a surrogate parent when that's appropriate, when we're expecting their autonomy in other ways." (T4)*

These comments allude to the active involvement of tutors in student learning and by definition the development of the student-tutor relationship.

There are suggestions in the interviews that the student-tutor relationship can be beneficial to both parties. Indeed, Broughan and Grantham (2012) suggest that the TSR can be influential in the persistence of academics in HE. T14 identifies *"the satisfaction you get from the students that do engage.....where you see them progressing.....[is why] we all do it"*. While T18 talks of tutors potentially changing a student's life chances, T15 suggests tutors learn from research active students. In contrast, T3 describes feelings of frustration and failure when students underperform in assessments, particularly those who appear to have engaged in class with the learning process.

A tutor's popularity, which could be taken as a proxy for their relationships with students, is 'measured' by the often manifestly personal qualitative comments in student surveys. Whilst T7 noted, *"I've had good feedback and I've put it down to my relationship with that particular group of students"*, T20 observed

*"it's not a beauty contest is it and I think [there will always be] students who you just cannot connect with.... you want to try and keep them on board but it's very challenging. Why should we like them? There's no reason why you should like them....they don't necessarily like you."*

T17 suggests respect for the tutor plays a significant role in SE suggesting, *"once you get that respect, then they'll come to your classes, they'll participate"* then adding *"if they don't respect the tutor and think they don't know what they're talking about [...] you've lost them instantly"*.

Institutional arrangements may pose challenges to the harmonious relationship Wadd (1979) describes as one where despite any elements of conflict the intensely held wants of both parties are met willingly and substantively. T8 describes the timetabled student contact hours as *"next to nothing"* which means *"it comes down to what [time] you as a person are prepared to sacrifice"*. Additionally the institution encourage the use of Moodle and other electronic means to communicate with students when according to T7 what students value is

*"their time with [tutors].....they like the podcast for revision, but actually, they quite like having time with a person."*

T7 also expressed the view that,

*"A large part of engagement is about the personal relationship staff have with the students and the more you automate, the more that breaks down and the less inhibitions there is on students complaining."*

The student-tutor is seen as changing over time as tutors and students get to know each other with the more positive relationships associated with perceptions of more positive engagement. This has led to suggestions by a number of tutors that where possible students should be allocated the same year or personal tutor throughout the entire programme of study. There is at the time of writing evidence that this approach has been implemented within the faculty.

Large classes can impede the development of the student-tutor relationship. T8 noted the difficulties of learning individual student names in large classes suggesting knowing their names



*".....would probably touch the sort of feeling side of them a little bit more.....they'd feel less like a number....I think a lot do feel like a number and I don't think that helps"*

On a similar point T1 recalled one of his colleagues who learns three student names before teaching starts then uses it in class making it look as though they know the students concerned personally. In the second week the tutor learns another three student names and uses those names in an attempt to make it look more random, less contrived perhaps. T1 expressed the desire to follow their colleague's approach in an attempt to demonstrate a similar interest in their students, which they feel, would be *"so much better"*. This approach of course takes time and effort.

T4 suggests there has been a change in the way the role of the tutor is perceived by students. Though this is not explicitly discussed in all of the interviews, there is arguably evidence in many of the interviews of tutors struggling to understand, and understanding differently, what their role as tutor is and how it is evolving or likely to evolve. In terms of the student-tutor relationship, T15 commented

*"I do think there's been a shift in power. it's a market, a marketised system so the buyer has to have as much power as the seller I suppose, taking an economic perspective, but in terms of actually getting students to do what they're supposed to do and getting them through the course and getting them good honours, I don't think it's useful".*

T4 commented,

*"I'm not wanting to give a good education because they're paying for it, I'm wanting to give them a good education because I want to improve their life chances. it's about improving their life chances and I recognise that most of ours don't come with the cultural capital that those students down the road come with...they don't have as many open doors"*

T20 made what is arguably an important consideration for all educators that in the student-tutor relationship there has to be boundaries. In a similar vein T5 commented,

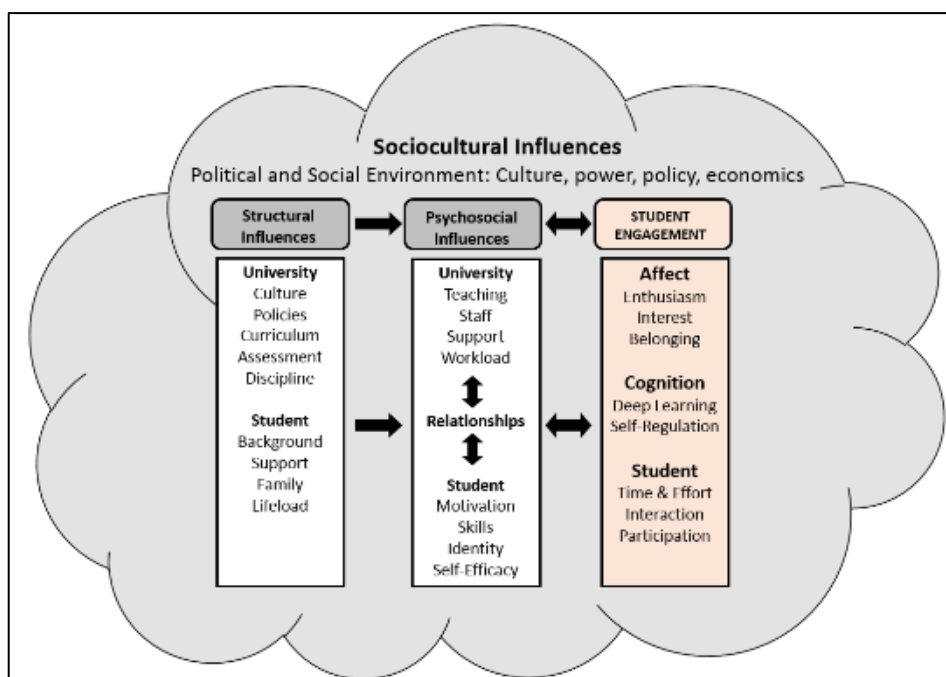
*"if our expectation is that they are here to learn then we're not mates, we're not friends that can sit on the side of the table and have a joke and a laugh. We are educators who are there to facilitate their learning and their engagement."*

#### **4.4.4 Section summary**

The findings suggest a lack of clarity about what sort of relationship tutors should seek to build with students and on what the relationship should be based. It is noticeable that the voices of a number of tutors interviewed who receive extremely positive student feedback are not featured in this section of the thesis. Some of the tutors who receive positive student feedback and whose voices are featured in this section focus more on what might be described as the cognitive features of the learning environment (inspirational, challenging) than on the emotional (friendly, supportive, nurturing) aspects. The efforts of some of the tutors who declare here an interest and involvement in providing this emotional, more pastoral support have not been rewarded with similarly positive feedback of their less nurturing peers.

The student-tutor relationship features in many of the interviews conducted. Tutor comments suggest they see the relationship with the student as potentially beneficial and yet the relationship is affected to differing degrees by the attitude or approach of the parties involved. Institutional arrangements are seen by some tutors as having a range of effects on the relationship, not all of these positive. There is a sense in the interviews that the nature of each relationship can differ over time and may require boundaries to be established.

## 4.5 Student engagement



**Figure 10 Student engagement (Kahu, 2013)**

### 4.5.1 Introduction

In this section, tutor perceptions of the meaning of SE are presented and discussed. This is followed by a discussion of tutor perceptions as they relate to the Kahu (2013) affect, cognition and student dimensions of the state of SE presented in Figure 10. These are respectively representative of the more commonly titled emotional, cognitive and behavioural dimensions of SE featured in the Literature Review in Chapter 2.

### 4.5.2 The nature of student engagement

The pervasive and indeterminate use of the term 'Student Engagement' (SE) in HE (Parsons and Taylor, 2011) is evident at NWU. Although at the time of writing there is no publicly available NWU SE definition, there is Student Engagement Policy. This sets out how NWU 'supports students to engage fully with their studies' and what NWU 'expects of students in relation to engagement with their course, how it will monitor that engagement, and what it will do where students are not engaging' (NWU 2018).

None of the participants offered an SE definition at the outset of the interview with many suggesting they had been prompted by the interview invitation to think about SE for the first time. The following quotes illustrate an apparent lack of clarity and consensus around the meaning of SE:

*"I think it's quite a hard one to sort of put definitions on it in terms of exactly what is engagement" (T14)*

*"I don't think I really know what it is because we measure it so many different ways" (T11)*

*"I don't think [tutors'] measure of student engagement is the same as what the institution thinks it is" (T15)*

*"I'm not sure that we know what the student's think engagement means" (T11).*

(T5) commented,

*"....we are expecting student engagement to be [...] eager bunnies sitting at the front of the room taking a thousand notes. Actually from a student's point of view their notion of engagement might mean turning up [...] 3 or 4 times a term and handing in the work" then added, "student engagement as I know it in the institution is different from how I consider it myself"*

According to T10,

*"...a student's engagement is strongly conditioned by their understanding of the process, the organisation, the environment and they will then spend time developing [what] gives them the best outcomes"*

T15 spoke for many when she said, *"I think we know what [SE] isn't"*. On a similar point, T4 suggested it might be more useful to *"look for non-engagement rather than trying to pin down what we mean by engagement"* (T4).

Reflecting during the interview on how SE might be defined, the majority suggested it would allude to active input and effort on the part of the student, but in common with many SE definitions (See examples in Table 2), few proposed the inclusion of any institutional responsibility. Engagement is described by a majority of the tutors as taking many forms for example listening and absorbing information, *"getting to grips with the material"*; *"that enquiring mind, going a bit further...that's the real engagement"*; the acquisition of skills through active involvement in relevant activities. Almost half the tutors suggested SE is more than just class attendance and assessment outcomes. T2 for example suggested that

*“The mark of engagement is whether they’ve joined the conversation and whether they’ve got things to contribute, whether they show signs that they’ve read anything or even if they haven’t whether they are beginning to articulate some of the issues we might have been discussing”.*

### **4.5.3 Affect**

The affect, dimension which is more commonly referred to in the literature as the emotional dimension, acknowledges aspects of engagement such as interest in and enthusiasm for the topic and the sense of belonging to the institution. Affect juxtaposes intrinsic motivations to engage (driven by pleasure and interest in the learning) with instrumental motivations to engage (for example behavioural and cognitive engagement as a means to an end, which are discussed below).

#### **4.5.3.1 Interest**

The majority of the tutors interviewed identified interest in the subject as an effective driver of student engagement. The following quotes illustrate this point.

*“...it was really difficult to get them involved, except for the ones who were really interested, again the interest drove the engagement” (T1)*

*“...you can’t force them to join the conversation but some do and when they do you know you begin to see that they become a bit more interested and prepared to offer their ideas and opinions and engage with you in a dialogue and debate” (T2)*

Comparing the numbers of students with a ‘genuine’ interest in learning T6 noted,

*“There seem to be more of them in second year, and even more in third year”.*

It was also suggested that interest levels were affected by the relevance of the topic under discussion for example in terms of its authenticity, or its relevance to an assessment. A small number of tutors expressed the view that students should be more willing or more easily encouraged to engage in elective units than in core units. The logic underpinning this view is that students are required to study core units but select elective units they are interested in.

#### **4.5.3.2 Enthusiasm**

Though featured in Kahu’s (2013) affect dimension of the state of SE, enthusiasm does not feature in any of the interviews with NWU tutors. The SE literature tends to include enthusiasm in research concerning desired tutor characteristics and behaviours (see for

example Voss and Gruber (2006)) and pedagogies that enthuse students (Barnett, 2009). In the extensive review of the SE literature undertaken for the present study, other than Kahu (2013) no other references to student enthusiasm were identified.

#### **4.5.3.3 Belonging**

Belonging did not feature in any of the interviews conducted although T18 recounted an episode with a first year student whose attendance at the beginning of the academic year had been poor.

*“This year I had a student who was not engaged at all. He’d not really been attending much after the first couple of weeks. I managed to get him in for a meeting just after Christmas. We had a chat and he’d made a friend in the other half of the year group who had different tutorial groups to him. So I moved him in to that other tutorial group so he could be with his friend [and] he’s fine [now].”*

#### **4.5.4 Cognition**

Kahu (2013) describes the cognition dimension as concerning learner self-regulation and the effectiveness of their use of deep learning strategies. Ownership of learning was amongst the ‘individual’ characteristics of engagement mentioned by tutors.

##### **4.5.4.1 Deep learning**

There are no direct references to deep learning in the interviews. As noted previously however, T10 described examinations as a test of memory rather than of a deeper understanding. This position lends support to Bean’s (2001) view that learning is greater in coursework than exams (Bean, 2001).

Most interviews include references to engagement levels. T5 for example stated,

*“There’s a surface level of ‘turn up and be in the building’ and there’s [real] engagement with the learning experience and wanting to squeeze it like a sponge [to get] as much out of it as you can.” (T5)*

In relation to a perceived ‘engagement hierarchy’, T3 noted

*“I do think [that] critical thinking is a little bit more of a valuable, intense process than just skill-learning”.*

A number of tutors suggested intentions or goals determined a student's level of engagement. T9 for example suggested

*"there's engagement for passing purposes, for assessment purposes, and there's engagement in a deeper way for learning and understanding and knowledge".*

The tutors are consistent with the literature in their association of depth of learning with the nature of assessment but deep learning did not feature explicitly in tutor discussions around the meaning of SE.

T12 outlined a scenario familiar to many NWU tutors involving a student calculating the effort they would need to expend in order to pass the assessment on a particular unit.

*"so what I need to do is I need 36% in this so what I'm gonna do is write my name, answer the first question and then walk out'. Excellent, that's great, you know, that's student engagement to its absolute utmost, so they've worked it out to the last thing." (T12)*

#### **4.5.4.2 Self-regulation**

There is an expectation at the institution that students will interact independently outside timetabled teaching hours with the teaching and learning resources in the university's Moodle virtual learning environment (Moodle). Although less than half the tutors refer to Moodle they do so in terms of its potentially negative impact on attendance. According to T18 the student excuse for not attending is sometimes "...everything's on Moodle anyway" to which she responds *"the slides might be on Moodle but all the stuff I'm saying around the slides isn't"*. T8 commented that Moodle

*"probably in a sense doesn't help with engagement. It gives students the opportunities to be engaged but then they've got to be much more self-disciplined in order to go through and do the work".*

Questions relating to how NWU tutors operationalise Moodle and its impact more broadly on SE are outside the scope of this research. What is important in this study however is that a number of the NWU tutors participating in this study expressed concerns about its potentially negative impact on attendance and learning.

#### 4.5.5 Student

The 'student' dimension encapsulates positive learner conduct such as compliance with rules including attendance, and involvement in learning including asking questions and time on task, and participation in extracurricular activities (Fredricks et al. 2004; Kahu, 2013). Student disengagement, however that presents itself (problematic behaviour or dropping out for example), might according to Zyngier (2008) be symptomatic of a failure by the institution to enable the student to achieve their potential.

##### 4.5.5.1 Time and effort

Particular views on the nature of engagement were expressed and how it is or ideally should be 'enacted'. Tutor contributions relevant to the 'student' dimension focus on the student's active involvement or lack of active involvement in learning. The student actions tutors identify are broadly categorised as 'choosing what to study', 'Independent study', 'attendance', 'participation in class', 'assessment' and 'participating in extra-curricular activities'. Discussions concerning student action or inaction within many of these categories featured in just over half the interviews conducted. In contrast, the approaches and procedures in place to manage these behaviours featured in the overwhelming majority of interviews. The shared emphasis on process and the state of engagement reflects the premises on which the broader definition of engagement intrinsic in the Kahu (2013) model is based.

The importance of 'getting into the habit of studying' at the start of the course is mentioned by only three tutors and is not mentioned in the literature reviewed. Experience as a student and tutor suggests however that Moore et al's (2008) observation that timetabled sessions might provide structure in a potentially unstructured student schedule, applies to regular study. There is more anecdotal evidence of students who have not developed a regular study habit suffering as a consequence, than those who benefit because they have. Independent study involving reading and research to consolidate and build on the material imparted in lecture and in preparation for tutorial sessions is identified as key by just under half the tutors interviewed. T6 noted,

*"I guess many students just want to get a good degree or at least a degree anyway and they're not particularly keen on reading more than they have to but then, you know, they don't read for its own sake." (T6)*



Illustrating the negative impact of unpreparedness T17 commented

*“they’ve had the lecture the week previous and [.....] they come knowing nothing because [.....] they’ve not looked at their notes at all, they come to the tutorial, there’s a numerical question, get cracking on with it, absolute carnage cos nobody’s looked at it, nobody’s read it, nobody’s practiced it, nothing, waste of time”.*

Although the year of study T17 is referring to is unclear, T16 who is more used to teaching final year undergraduate and postgraduate students admitted to feeling rather surprised when second year undergraduates arrived at the tutorial without having completed the pre-tutorial reading. T16 commented

*“[I said] ‘what do you mean you haven’t done the reading’, I just couldn’t get my head around it, I’m like.... this is not what I’m used to cos I’m so used to my level 6s now who will do it or enough of them will do it so we can have a really good session”.*

A student’s lack of preparedness for taught sessions may be an irregular or regular occurrence. The questions concerning regular unpreparedness centre around a number of possible issues including whether behavioural engagement changes as a student progresses through a course of study and why this might be the case; whether the student has developed the good study habits referred to earlier in this study; what the student perceives to be the value of preparedness for study. Both irregular and regular preparedness may be attributable to individual personal circumstances of which the tutor may be unaware. This potentially complex set of individual student factors raises questions over the validity of behaviour as evidence, or an expression of engagement.

Tutors refer to an instrumental approach to study and university more generally among students. T19 noted students seemed *“quite happy to cut corners”* attributing this approach to working full time, often in the evenings then added *“they’ve got a life as well”*.

T5 opined *“I suppose there’s instrumental.... ‘I’m doing this because it’s the only way my mother is going to pay for me for the next three years’ or ‘because it’s the only way I’m going to get to live in Manchester for three years’”*.

T7 recounted his experience of students he described as *“instrumental, entirely focussed on what will get them the most marks in the assignment and they get very frustrated when you say ‘well I can’t tell you’... here’s the brief, you’ve got the brief, we’ve both got the brief, you need to put something into that to be able to get a good mark and I can’t tell you what that is, it’s your assignment.”*

On a similar point T17 stated *“they want specific focus areas in the exam and I don’t believe in that”*.

A final year student who was coming to the end of their placement year and reflecting on their final year elective unit choices suggested that the choice was between a unit that would provide them with skills needed in the type of jobs they would be applying for after graduation, or an alternative unit a friend and recent graduate had told them was easy to get a first in. According to the student, potential employers were more interested in the degree classification than the individual units studied. These comments offer support for Maringe’s (2006) finding that return on investment in terms of career prospects at graduation have a greater influence on course choice than interest in the subject.

T5 suggested, *“SE is engaging in a journey of learning”* and T10 described SE as *“a stepping stone to learning”*. Alluding to the transient nature of SE referred to in Kahu (2013), Coates (2007) and (Fredricks et al. 2004), T17 commented on *“a noticeable difference in engagement between the first and the third”* year students adding that there is a *“noticeable improvement in the final years”*. T17 attributed this to the student recognising that *“it actually matters”* because *“....this counts towards my degree now”*.

The following quotes illustrate a common view among tutors that students are less interested in study than they are in gaining the qualification, an attitude attributed by Zepke (2015) to the economic realities generated by the demands of a knowledge-based economy.

*“They’re not interested in the subject. They’re only doing it to get the degree”*  
(T17)

*“They haven’t got better alternatives and they are not interested in what they’re doing. They want the piece of paper but they really aren’t interested. It is really a form of punishment for them and so they are disengaged”*. (T8)

*“No matter what you do they’re just not interested, they’re here just because they need that paper that says they have a degree”. (T1)*

But as T1 further commented, *“...coming to university is like joining the gym.....you’re only going to get fit if you bother to put the effort in”*.

Most tutors suggested attendance and engagement were not necessarily positively correlated. T18 for example suggested non-attendance might indicate there was a problem for the student(s) concerned. Commenting on the impact of non-attendance on assessment performance T16 noted

*“I’ve marked one paper, gave it a 70, I’ve only got 120 students on the unit, I’ve no idea who that person is, I’ve never seen them, they never come to anything and they’ve got a 70”*.

T16 acknowledged that *“there’ll always be the outlier but I think in general....the ones that are [achieving high marks] are the ones that [attend]”*. T14 suggested attendance tended to fall ‘naturally’ over the course of the academic year and that the causal link between attendance and attainment was unproven.

A small number of tutors who teach predominantly final year undergraduate and postgraduate students suggested attendance should be a matter of choice and questioned the introduction of a mandatory attendance policy. A similarly small number of tutors teaching predominantly first year undergraduates tended to favour a mandatory attendance policy with two of them questioning the lack of consequences for non-attendance.

#### **4.5.5.2 Interaction and participation**

Half of the tutors interviewed attributed some level of importance to students’ active involvement in learning although the nature of the active involvement discussed varied. One tutor commented on the positive influence on engagement of elective units that students has specifically chosen to enrol on, *“you get students there because they actually want to be there, they’ve made a positive choice”*.

Discussions relating to student in-class behaviour featured in only four tutor interviews. One of the tutors raised the disruption to the session caused by students arriving late. Another tutor talked of a core of students

*“that perhaps should not be at university, or are struggling, or learn differently, and then they all get in a group, and they all muck about. We get frustrated, they get frustrated, other people get frustrated with them, and it’s just a vicious circle, and nobody gets engaged and we all strut out of the lecture theatre fed up”.*

Although the utility of mobile devices in class was acknowledged, according to T18,

*“mobile phones are having an impact on engagement. I think they cannot be without their phone anymore. I’ve tried all sorts to get them to stop looking at Facebook”.*

T6 suggested *“students who are not that interested will look at their mobile phone and play games, or chat to each other or talk about television given the choice”* adding *“A large fraction of my time is focused on that task.”*

A small number of tutors expressed disappointment at the lack of student engagement in extra-curricular activities. Such activities, which tend to be voluntary, include for example, formative assessment opportunities, personal tutor meetings, programme reading group sessions, faculty academic skill sessions. One of the tutors suggested there had been (an unconfirmed) 10% attendance of Business School students at a recent programme of employability focused events organised by the faculty in ‘Professional Development Week’. In their weekly personal tutor hours the two of the tutors noted *“I hardly see anybody”* and *“I haven’t had any come...I’ve got 80 second year tutees”*. The third tutor stated

*“if you give students an optional essay, very few will do it in my experience”* then added, *“If you say to the students ‘this won’t count towards your degree but please do it anyway’, in my experience most of them won’t bother”.*

Reflecting on the apparent lack of student engagement with extra-curricular learning activities T3 commented,

*“All that stuff is nice once you have some engagement going on, then yes that can be furthered but we’re starting off way below the baseline I think and so we have to address [curricular engagement] first”.*

#### **4.5.5.3 Attendance**

Whilst three tutors express a belief that attendance improves attainment in assessments, two others suggest the suggested causal link is unproven. T16 suggested

*“there is a correlation between how engaged they’ve been in terms of coming to class and coming to talk to us individually and the mark [but] there will inevitably be some people that have done everything that we’ve asked of them and just hand in a piece of work that’s not very good”.*

T6 expressed the view that

*“Students aren’t going to learn anything unless they actually turn up to lectures and tutorials and do the reading and think about the issues and actually respond, and talk in tutorials”.*

Whilst non-attendance might be an indication that the student has other issues and not simply that they have chosen not to attend, T8 noted *“if we had a car park that was free, we’d get more people turning up”*. Reflecting on the impact of non-attendance more generally T12 commented,

*“If [students] don’t turn up, it affects the people that are engaged and do turn up because the atmosphere and the overall teaching experience feels different”* according to another tutor.

Tutor views on the relationship between attendance and engagement is discussed further in section 4.3.1.4.

The availability of lecture notes online was identified by a small number of tutors as encouraging non-attendance and whilst T8 suggested online resources offered students opportunities to engage, she also suggested students had to be *“much more self-disciplined in order to go through and do the work”*. Whether the students actually made use of the online resources was questioned by T12 who commented, *“true engagement with online resources is difficult to measure”*.

Three tutors commented on the importance of establishing an understanding of what could be appropriately described as behaviours that encourage engagement and the benefits this can achieve. T15 noted, *“you’ve got to get the good habits instilled at the beginning”*. T13 who has a wealth of experience teaching first year undergraduates suggested engagements needs to start when the students first arrive and other things have not taken their attention. This according to T13 is

*“when we need to make them realise that they are now moving from being children to being adults, and being an adult is not just about rights, it’s about responsibilities”.*

T10 expressed the view that on arrival, when first years are enthused about the degree programme they have enrolled on, *“you can do an awful lot [them] to try and get them into a process where they learn for the sake of learning rather than for the sake of passing an assessment”*. These habits and behaviours involve the regular independent study expected of a student as part of their programme of study (see local context chapter for further details on what this entails).

Five tutors highlighted the importance of reading for learning. T6 for example expressed the view that students are *“not particularly keen on reading more than they have to”* and that *“they don’t read for its own sake”*. The same tutor added that without the reading the only information the students would receive would be what the tutor could get across to them in a two-hour lecture and a one-hour tutorial each week. This he feels would be *“very superficial”*. On a similar point T18, a sports tutor commented, *“they can’t just rely on SKY Sports to get their information, they have to do the reading”*.

T9 noted that the students who achieved firsts on his units were interested and undertook the required reading and completed the tutorial pre-work. Three tutors expressed frustration about an apparent unwillingness of many students to read the relevant literature as this is unquestionably an integral element of studying for a degree. T15 who teaches final year students said, *“I have students who say ‘do I really have to read that whole article?’...that’s not the approach that they should be taking”*. Another final year tutor said, *“I found when it was an elective unit only the better students were completing the preparatory work”*. When first year tutor T13 asked the students what she could do to get them to prepare for the tutorial, the students responded that they did not have time, a number of them because of their part-time jobs. This relates to the balancing of priorities discussed earlier in this chapter.

Referring to follow-up work another first year tutor T17 recalled,

*“they’ve had the lecture in the previous week and have not looked at their notes at all. They come to the tutorial and its absolute carnage because nobody’s*

*looked at anything, nobody's read anything, nobody's practiced anything, nothing, waste of time".*

T16 who was new to second year teaching expressed surprise that the students were not preparing for tutorials as this had not been the case with her final years. Lack of reading and tutorial preparation it seems is an issue across all years of all programmes but not necessarily all units.

The following quote from T17 illustrates the positive effects that, according to seven tutors, students can have on each other's engagement.

*"...there's a group of them that included that [particular student] I mentioned and it's [as if] by hanging out with him they've become more engaged and more interested.....because he's quite fired up about stuff they've become a bit more fired up and now they're reps"*

T17 also commented on the infectious nature of participation in class emphasising 'the collective' rather than the individual and referring to 'the mood in the room' rather than 'peer pressure' to engage. In such circumstances, T17 suggested it was more difficult to not engage than to engage.

One of the seven however noted that a dominant student or group of students in a class could potentially alienate the rest of the class, negatively affecting their levels of engagement. In contrast, T20 recalled, the *"mature students [...] helped us spark off a discussion with the younger students and in some ways it helped them to come in and engage a bit more"*.

#### **4.5.6 Section summary**

Tutor observations appear consistent with the assertions that there is no coherent or comprehensive definition of SE (Parsons and Taylor, 2011), and that its meaning is assumed rather than known (Trowler, 2010). Tutors observations also suggest that the shared understanding deemed necessary by Kahu (2013) has still to be realised at NWU. There is however a feeling that engagement is sometimes driven by return on investment rather than a genuine interest in study.

In common with the representation of the state of SE within the Kahu (2013) framework, tutors perceive engagement to be 'individual' and associated with a range of individual feelings towards the subject studied including interest, enthusiasm, passion and motivation.

Tutors do not acknowledge the human relationships that render an individual student's engagement potentially malleable and more easily changed than an individual trait or general tendency (Fredricks et al. 2004).



## **5 Conclusions**

### **5.1 Introduction**

There is no consensus in the literature on the meaning of SE and its drivers and barriers are unclear. However, despite now knowing what SE is, it is widely acknowledged as a key contributor to student success (Krauss and Coates, 2008; Kuh, 2009a; Thomas, 2012). This is of course a contradiction and it needs to be addressed. Tutors in the present study were also unable to define SE and yet they are charged with assuring student learning, thus tutor perceptions of SE are important. The Teacher-Student Relationship is the crux of the learning situation (Smith, 2007) and is fundamental in the development of the student (Brougham and Grantham, 2012). Despite tutor's importance, their voice is missing in the extant literature.

This thesis has provided a new conceptualisation of SE, which adds the tutor perceptions to the perspective presented by Kahu (2013). It has done so by addressing the following research questions in an extensive review of the SE literature and by undertaking a thematic analysis of data collected in interviews with 20 tutors at the organisation under study.

- 1 How do tutors perceive SE?
- 2 What do tutors perceive to be SE drivers and barriers?
- 3 To what extent is the tutor voice represented in the SE discourse?

Hence, the thesis has addressed a significant gap in the literature.

This chapter draws conclusions from the key findings of the study, and outlines the resulting contributions to theory and practice. This is followed by short sections critically reflecting on the study's methodological approach and making suggestions for further research.

### **5.2 Summary of the main findings**

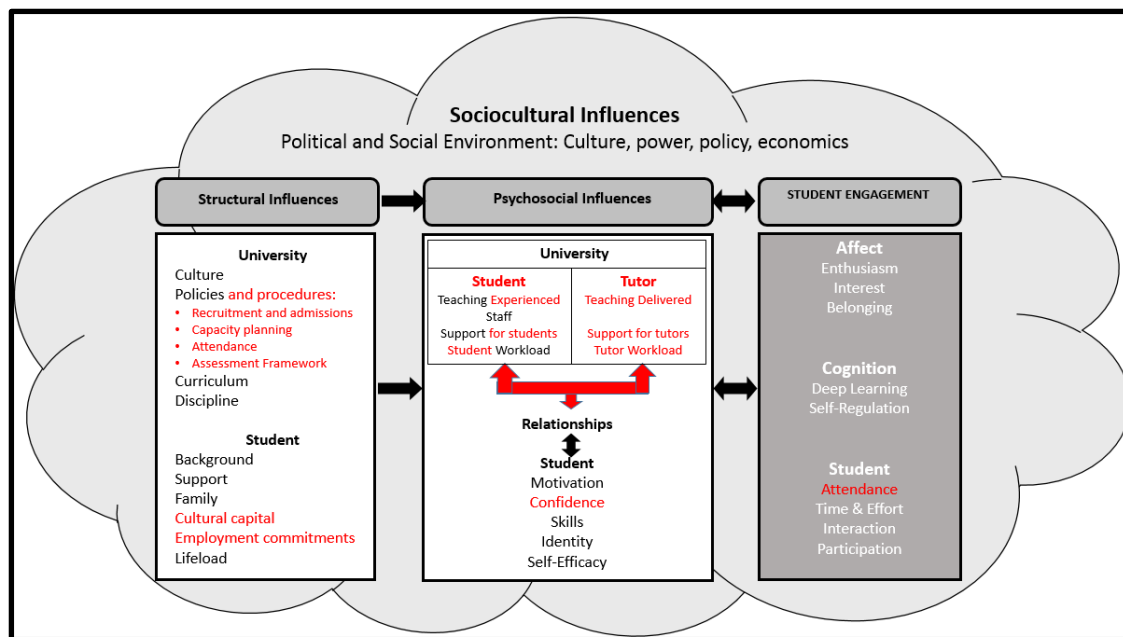
This thesis presents novel insights into SE through the systematic application of the first four elements of the Kahu (2013) framework, in a thematic analysis of the interview data (presented in Chapter 4). This has enabled the identification of drivers and barriers to SE and uncovered the extent to which tutors feel their voice is heard by the institution. The enhanced version of Kahu's (2013) framework presented in section 5.3, and informed by results of the present study, illustrates the similarities and differences between the literature and tutor perceptions of SE and its influences upon engagement.

The findings from this study suggest that the lens through which tutors view SE is too narrow. This explains the difficulties tutors have understanding their cohorts and knowing how to engage them. This might indicate further CPD is required as well as access to student data and the skills to identify and interpret SE relevant information contained within the data. This thesis illustrates that the term 'student engagement' does not advance academic understanding of the underlying processes, and calls into question the narrow approach of the university in their management practices and use of data.

The main objective of the research has therefore been met; namely, to add further clarity on the meaning of SE and its drivers and barriers, through the incorporation of the tutor perspective. The elucidation of differences in student and tutor SE perspectives extends existing knowledge and is an important contribution to theory and practice. In terms of practice, the findings of this study reveal that a tutor's understanding of student engagement influences the design of their teaching resources and ultimately the quality of their teaching. Teaching quality, as measured by the UK Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) introduced by the Government in 2017, is important as this directly affects the student experience and, hence, the institution's reputation and ultimately levels of funding. The findings are supported by extensive empirical evidence and are closely linked to the literature. In many cases, the findings from this study support the literature but in some cases, they challenge established understanding in the literature or add to knowledge. These are therefore contributions to knowledge and they are summarised in the following section.

### 5.3 Theoretical contributions of the study

#### *Contribution 1: An enhanced version of the Kahu (2013) framework*



**Figure 11 Enhanced framework of the state of student engagement and its influences**

Kahu's (2013) framework has provided a useful roadmap for this research and future research already in the planning stages. It draws together seemingly disparate strands of SE related research, providing the wider lens through which it can be viewed holistically. The framework facilitates a conceptual view of the role in SE of each of its elements and the bi-directional relationships between them. It also exposes the individual nature of SE. This study extends theory by applying the Kahu's (2013) framework in a new context. In its original form the Kahu (2013) framework represents a predominantly student perspective of SE, its antecedents and consequences. The enhanced and empirically informed version of the framework proposed in this study, and presented in Figure 11, reflects the perspective of the tutors of NWU, the organisation under study. It presents a more detailed view of SE to the student-informed view in Kahu's (2013) framework. The changes evident in the enhanced framework are summarised below. It should be noted that SE influences that are not present in the interview data are considered not to have emerged as important in the study but are retained in the alternative model. In essence, the absence of data is not interpreted as data in the present study.

### **Sociocultural influences**

Sociocultural influences originate in the broader political and social context where teaching and learning takes place, and are critical to understandings of SE (Kahu, 2013). However, only government policy featured in the data collected. Tutors identified tuition fees, the NSS and the REF, as influencing SE directly and indirectly. A primary focus in many of the interviews is the perceived impact on tutors workload and teaching, of the institutional responses to government policies rather than the government policies themselves. There was no explicit acknowledgement of government involvement in the introduction of these measures, which might suggest a need for greater transparency around the origins of new, or changes to existing institutional policies and procedures. Further research would help to establish any effects of increased transparency on SE.

Culture, power, and economics influences within the political and social environment did not feature in the data collected. However, the explanation of these influences in Kahu (2013) is limited, and the literature reviewed in this study did not add any detail.

### **University structural influences**

University structural influences originate in the characteristics of the institution and the institutional arrangements that shape the context in which teaching and learning takes place (Kahu 2013). The University structural influences were the most prevalent category of influences in the data collected; in particular the NWU policies and procedures. This is interesting because the university structural influences identified by tutors directly affect their day-to-day tasks and their teaching, as well as affecting, often indirectly, SE.

Analysis of the study data did not reveal any allusions to a particular NWU culture, although one tutor suggested the culture at the student's previous institution would be different to the culture at NWU. This is important because research suggests that the culture of a university can be a significant barrier to engagement for many students, in particular non-traditional students (Thomas, 2002; Griffiths et al. 2005; Christie et al. 2008) who make up a significant proportion of the NWU student body.

The policies and procedures of the university featured in all of the interviews conducted in this study in particular recruitment and admissions, capacity planning, attendance, and assessment.

**Recruitment and admissions:** The data suggests few tutors are involved in student recruitment at NWU and the few that are suggest they are not entirely familiar with the selection criteria. This is important because tutors must ensure that ‘academic socialisation’ (Brawer, 1996) and “enculturation into the life and practices of the university” (Katanis, 2000b:103) occurs for all students. The success of this transition is determined by the extent to which tutors understand the background in which the student’s expectations of university were set (van der Meer, 2012). This is a particular problem for non-traditional students who are unlikely to have the university experience of family members and friends to draw on (Anderson, 2002). Furthermore, to promote and encourage student engagement, retention and completion, and an inclusive and engaging curriculum that reflects an enhanced understanding of students and their learning needs (Stefani, 2008) are needed. NWU tutors do not have access to the individual student data collected during the recruitment and admissions process that would provide this enhanced understanding.

**Capacity planning:** Capacity planning in terms of acquisition and deployment of teaching resource and physical accommodation features in most tutor interviews. NWU has to accommodate high numbers of students, and often resorts to large class sizes, team teaching, and the employment of sessional academic staff. Although large class sizes allow universities to accommodate greater numbers of students with fewer resources (Cuseo, 2007; Hornsby and Osman, 2014; Maringe and Sing, 2014), they may have a detrimental effect on students’ performance (Dearing, 1997; Cuseo, 2004; Bandiera et al, 2010). NWU tutors share this view. Student-faculty interaction is strongly associated with a number of positive student outcomes, including retention, academic achievement, critical thinking, and educational aspiration (Astin, 1993; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993 in Cuseo, 2007). However, as class size increases, the amount and intensity of student-tutor interactions and exchanges generally reduce (Gibbs, 1992; Mulryan-Kyne, 2010). There is a suggestion that at NWU, large classes within large cohorts, have discouraged more innovative and interactive teaching methods. To maintain a consistent in-class teaching experience, teaching sessions are often prescribed to a low-level of detail, and according to one tutor, perceived by those involved to

be to the detriment of the student experience. The use of sessional staff, often PhD students, is commonplace at NWU. However, the support for teaching they are offered is limited according to a number of tutors interviewed.

**Attendance:** Student attendance at timetabled sessions is often treated as synonymous with engagement and common measures of SE (Markwell, 2007). Whilst ‘accountability to society’, ‘student well-being’, and ‘preparation for the workplace’ arguments are used to justify the introduction of mandatory and monitored attendance policies, the moral and philosophical grounds for their introduction are unclear when students are paying their own tuition fees (MacFarlane 2013). This lack of clarity is evident among a number of NWU tutors teaching on the final year of various undergraduate programmes, who also support Moore et al’s (2008) view that students have to weigh up the perceived opportunity cost or expected value of attendance, which, depending on the outcome, can either be a driver or barrier to SE. Furthermore, mandatory, monitored attendance contradicts the commitment to develop independent learners (MacFarlane, 2013), a commitment often stated at NWU.

**Assessment:** Gibbs (1999:41) describes assessment as ‘the most powerful lever teachers have to influence the way students respond to a course and behave as learners’. It is widely recognised in the data that NWU students appear more engaged during in-class and out-of-class contacts around assessment dates. The associated depth of learning however is not always clear, and is often determined by the nature of the assessment and the nature of the tutor-provided assessment support and guidance. As Boud (1990:104) notes, students who “learn to look always to their tutors to identify the objectives of their study, appropriate tasks to tackle and criteria for judgement” will not achieve the desired critical thinking, deep understanding and independent activity.

Curriculum and discipline were not evident in the data collected for this study but are discussed above in the literature review.

### **Student structural influences**

Student structural influences originate in the convergence of the pressures emanating from different aspects of a student’s past and present lives and future expectations (Kahu 2013). Although the literature evidences the potentially significant drivers and barriers to SE, the

different student structural influences present, they received much less attention in the tutor interviews than the university structural influences. As previously stated, tutors are unlikely to have any information on the student's background, previous educational experience, or current personal circumstances unless the student discloses it. However, many tutors described in-class conversations where students had unintentionally divulged personal information for example about their family circumstances, financial situation or employment status. Tutors with student support responsibilities indicated they were granted access to student data related to student's particular support needs. Cultural capital and employment commitments as SE influences featured in many interviews though in the case of cultural capital not explicitly in all instances. Both have therefore been added to the list of student structural influences in the enhanced framework.

### **Psychosocial influences**

In Kahu's (2013) framework the university psychosocial influences of SE that derive from the teaching arrangements are presented as the teaching the students experience, the institutional support they receive, and their study-related workload. Analysis of the data collected in this study revealed a tutor focus on the teaching they delivered, the institutional support they received, their workload, and their effects on SE. Consequently, these SE influences are included in a tutor psychosocial influences element in the enhanced framework. Tutors were silent on the university psychosocial influences.

The student psychosocial influences of SE derive from the student's emotional and mental states and their actual and self-assessed skills (Kahu, 2013). The analysis of the interview data did not reveal any mention of skills, identity and self-efficacy. The analysis did reveal references to student motivation and confidence, which is therefore added to the student psychosocial influences element in the enhanced framework.

The student-tutor relationship rather than any relationship between the student and the institution features in many of the interviews conducted. Tutor comments suggest that what they see as a potentially beneficial student-tutor relationship as far as SE is concerned is affected to differing degrees by the attitude or approach of the parties involved. The effects of institutional arrangements on the student-tutor relationship are not all positive according to many tutors.

## **Student engagement**

This study suggests that the lens through which tutors view SE brings into focus behavioural aspects such as interaction and participation that are manifested in the classroom, and cognitive aspects for which are manifested in (for example) coursework submitted. Several tutors suggested attendance was evidence of engagement, therefore this has been included with the 'Student' influences in the Student Engagement element of enhanced framework.

The emotional aspects in Kahu's (2013) framework do not feature in tutor explanations of engagement. Tutors appear ignorant of the feeling of belonging that engagement inspires, and that is critical to student retention and success in HE (Thomas, 2012). Enthusiasm does not feature in tutor interviews. It only features in literature concerning desired tutor characteristics and behaviours (see for example Voss and Gruber, 2006) and pedagogies that enthuse students (Barnett, 2009). Many tutors bemoaned a perceived lack of student interest in their choice of subject. In common with the literature (Maringe, 2006; Zepke, 2015), tutors suggested return on investment rather than interest in the discipline drove course choice. However it was suggested that if one could stir a student's interest, engagement was more likely to follow. Many tutors talked of the infectious nature of student interest and engagement within a group. However, the question remains as to how student interest can be encouraged.

The enhanced framework produced in this study retains Kahu's (2013) depiction of SE as a unique and individually experienced state, but with an empirically informed, richer and more complex array of influencing factors. However, tutors' silence on particular element influences suggests they have a partially informed understanding of SE, and without access to data to further inform this understanding, the difficulties for tutors and inevitably the students they teach, will persist.

### ***Contribution 2: The tutor, neglected in the literature, is given voice***

This study provides an alternative, more holistic and more complete lens through which to view SE. The source of the data in this study is the academic tutor, a key stakeholder in student engagement. The sources for empirical research in the existing SE literature are often students. Students are the main source of primary data for research across the behavioural,



emotional and cognitive dimensions of SE (Isbell and Cote, 2009; Kandiko and Mawer, 2013; Latif and Miles, 2013; Nicholson et al. 2011). Other studies make use of student survey data (Krause, 2007; Kuh, 2007; Langan et al. 2015; Pike and Kuh, 2005) providing breadth rather than depth of understanding. Where tutors are consulted, the research is quite narrow and lacking the breadth of discussion SE deserves (Carbone, 1999; Fraser and Bosanquet, 2006; Van Schalkwyk et al. 2015).

This thesis differs from previous research because it provided the tutors with a platform to discuss a range of areas of relevance and concern, albeit within the boundaries of SE, an undeniably vast and complex concern. Tutors interviewed welcomed the opportunity to discuss their concerns around student engagement, learning, and the processes they felt had been designed without their needs in mind. It is easier to engage tutors in debate if they perceive their current position to be acknowledged and valued. Providing a model of SE that does has the potential to reengage tutors in the SE discourse. The revised framework achieves this. Including the tutor voice provides a lens tutors can identify with and thus engage with.

By exploring the tutor voice, whilst adding significantly to knowledge, this study also broadly confirms much of the extant SE research and most aspects of the first four Kahu (2013) framework elements. This research also provides a richness and a depth that was previously lacking. By taking an empirical approach, this study contributes an essential depth of insight into how it feels to be a tutor tasked with manipulating, measuring and managing SE and how tutors are inclined to react given their often mutually conflicting objectives e.g. raising attainment whilst maintaining standards.

***Contribution 3: The emphasis on ‘lifeload’ in the literature is not reflected from the tutor perspective.***

Matters that Kahu (2013) brings together under the term ‘lifeload’ include “the sum of all the pressures in their life”, including university, “the needs of dependants, finances and health” (Kahu 2013:10). The tutors in this study were silent on these issues. However, it is unclear if the reason for the silence is that lifeload concerns were not seen to be relevant to the discussion or whether the tutors were ignorant of their potential impact on SE. Employment,

for example, was acknowledged as a financial necessity by some tutors and an irritation by others who seemed more concerned with the impact on class attendance than the longer-term impacts for the student. Mental health and wellbeing did not feature in the interviews. However, this might be due to lack of information rather than ignorance. Nevertheless, evidence suggests that lifeload is important and concerns matters those tasked with engaging students should be made aware of.

## **5.4 Practical contributions of this study**

### ***Contribution 4: Focus on UK context***

The UK context is underrepresented in the SE literature, where the research originates predominantly in Australasia and North America. This study adds to the richness of the student engagement research base through the addition of empirical data from the UK that focuses on the active engagement of students in learning. The study makes an equally valuable contribution to the UK SE literature where the conception of engagement as student voice is dominant (Buckley, 2018). There is a greater chance of this study's findings being relevant to the wider UK context because it is UK based research.

This research is also important in its own right, since it allows existing theory to be tested in a new context. Moreover, the issue of SE is highly topical at the time of writing.

### ***Contribution 5: Universities in their day-to-day operations are not sufficiently focussed on the underlying processes that influence SE***

The new conception of SE provided by this study presents opportunities to enhance a number of university processes and practices and thus to improve the experience of both students and tutors.

Although students do not always disclose information about personal circumstances likely to affect academic performance, the findings suggest that the institution has in its possession a wealth of student information that tutors do not have easy access to. The level of access to certain data is governed by data protection legislation, however any level of tutor awareness of students' prior learning experiences and outcomes, and significant personal circumstances likely to affect their learning has obvious benefits for tutors and students. It is particularly

important for tutors to have access to this information prior to first meeting the student(s). This would allow the tutor to accommodate the particular needs of the students in the design, development and delivery of their teaching. It would also facilitate a more sympathetic approach in any tutor-student exchanges. Examples of useful information include entry qualifications, levels of attainment in the previous year of study, personal circumstances that are not categorised as a disability and thus accommodated in a personal learning plan and therefore accessible to tutors. Easier access to the available information would also help tutors and programme support staff to manage more appropriately student attendance. Attendance is often treated as synonymous with engagement despite it providing at best a partial picture.

UK Universities are not in control of the environment in which they operate. University policies and procedures are often opaque and the rationale unclear. The need to react and respond in a timely fashion to changes in government policy can leave insufficient time for HEIs to explain to tutors the drivers and rationales for the institutional policies and procedures they introduce. The suggestion here is not that tutors are unaware of the changes in UK HE rather that the links between the environmental and institutional changes are often unclear. Transparency around the links and where feasible, the opportunity to contribute to the design of the institutions response, would facilitate a more sympathetic and compliant reception from tutors.

The data analysis provides clear evidence of a willingness among tutors to engage in continuing professional development, particularly in relation to their teaching practice. In some of the interviews however, there are suggestions that the training offered by the university is not as authentic and therefore less relevant than it should be. There is a suggestion for example that teaching large classes, as all of the tutors interviewed do, is not covered in any of the training sessions offered by the institution. This needs to be addressed because large classes are recognised in the literature and by the tutors interviewed as particularly challenging for tutors and a potential source of student dissatisfaction.

The University invests heavily in resources tutors can utilise to enhance the quality of their teaching and learning resources. Interactive software packages such as OMBEA Response that integrate seamlessly into PowerPoint facilitate the production of more interactive and

reportedly more engaging teaching and learning resources. Whilst group training sessions are offered, tutors also need time and support after these sessions to learn how to integrate the functionality provided by these utilities into their own teaching and learning resources. Comments from the tutors interviewed suggest that ongoing support is needed after formal training in the use of the new tools and techniques has taken place. This support would address an apparent lack of tutor confidence that presents itself as unwillingness to engage, which is not always an accurate reflection of the situation.

The author does not propose a definition of SE due to its multi-faceted and complex nature. Thus HEIs may be better served by not using this term. Instead it may be better to understand its component parts and address these separately.

### **5.5 Reflections on the study's methodological approach**

The trustworthiness of the qualitative research presented in this thesis should be assessed against the credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability criteria set out in Nowell et al (2017). The authentic representation of tutor contributions is key to judgements concerning research credibility. The recording and verbatim transcription of interviews and the express omission of responses influenced by researcher prompts assured the authenticity of the study. The transferability or generalisability of the research findings was not an intended outcome of this research. However, the thick descriptions presented in this thesis will inform judgements on the transferability of the findings to other sites. Dependability is assured by rigorously following Braun and Clarke's (2006) methodology. This approach has ensured the research process is "logical, traceable, and clearly documented" (Nowell et al 2017).

Throughout this study, there has been transparency around the theoretical, methodological, and analytical choices made. This has ensured the confirmability of the research. There is a detailed audit trail of the research undertaken and this is available on request.

It is not always easy to determine whether a tutor's comments relate to 'the state of SE' or the factors that influence it. Similarly, Kahu (2013) places 'interest' in the affect dimension of the state of SE but it could arguably have been placed with the student psychosocial influences.

Obstacles associated with thematic analysis include identification of an appropriate sample (addressed above), also projection (reading into or imposing personal competencies, values, thoughts and feelings on the raw information collected), and the potential impact on the analyses of the mood and style of the researcher (who is advised that patient perseverance pays off), both of which are addressed in the research evaluation below. Moreover, a more detailed knowledge of the NVivo software would have saved time and effort and reduced the stress experienced during the thematic analysis of the data.

## **5.6 Recommendations for future research**

This study has given voice to the tutor, a key stakeholder in student engagement, and has therefore made a valuable contribution to the current research. The study findings are captured in the enhanced framework of the state of student and its influences presented in Figure 11. It is recommended that this framework is now tested in a range of contexts, for example, different disciplines, Russell Group and private universities, outside the UK etc. A substantially different model of HE might provide a range of disconfirming data that may extend and refine the model further. The study focused on undergraduate study whereas future research could fruitfully explore tutor perceptions of foundation, postgraduate or doctoral level students' engagement.

Impact is an important outcome of any research and so it is recommended that processes incorporating measures to address what tutors perceive to be drivers and barriers to SE are implemented at NWU. This includes training tutors in the skills needed to produce and deliver the teaching and learning resources required by particular cohorts. The impact on the behavioural, affective and cognitive engagement of the cohorts can then be evaluated. In support of skills development, research is needed to identify more effective ways of communicating the findings in contemporary SE research to tutors whose research interests often sit within their discipline rather than within their profession.

Other research opportunities include the development and testing of the impact of closer and more meaningful links with feeder institutions on student expectations and readiness for university;

Finally, several participants commented on the infrequency of opportunities to discuss informally with academic colleagues their professional and personal experiences in HE. This suggests a potential need to provide a suitable environment in which informal, collegial conversations can take place.

## **5.7 Concluding comments**

In UK HE, use of the term 'student engagement' is ubiquitous and yet a consensus on its meaning remains elusive. So many conversations contain the word 'engagement', that it has become meaningless, overused and hijacked, a catch-all for various agendas. Hence, we should stop talking about engagement; it is too big and nebulous. Kahu considers engagement in terms of component parts that each warrant detailed investigation. If we are looking to justify the investment in HE in terms of its outcomes i.e., a job that earns sufficient money to pay back the substantial investment, we need to look at the different aspects/elements of engagement rather than talking about engagement as if it is something that can be easily managed and measured. We need to review the rationales for our current measures of engagement, for example attendance - because it tells us where the student is; assessment - because it tells us whether they are understanding the subject and more importantly are still with us.

In the literature, there are few, if any, criticisms of Kahu and her work is reasonably well cited. Having applied her framework in detail, key omissions are the tutor voice; key criticisms are a lack of clarity as to whether belonging is an influence or a characteristic of SE, and the simultaneous treatment of attendance as an influence and evidence of the extent of engagement. Nevertheless, the extensive literature review undertaken above has not discovered an alternative framework that draws together the discrete strands of the SE literature in a holistic framework in the way that Kahu has.

Consequently, this thesis is significant and highly relevant, both practically and academically, and it represents an important contribution to the student engagement literature. I look forward to taking an active role in shaping and contributing to the emerging discussions over the coming months and years.

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